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DEATH-TRAILER,

THE SCOURGE OF THE PLAIN CREEKS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

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872. THE BLACK RIDER.	408. RED DAN.
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DEATH-TRAILER.

CHAPTER I.

A PECULIAR INTRODUCTION.

THE gray shades of twilight were fast deepening into night. A gentle breeze eddying through the scattering grove, caused the bright flames of the little camp-fire to flicker fitfully. The faint hazy wreaths of vapor floated weirdly round the head of the Indian as he calmly smoked his pipe.

A long-drawn, muffled cry comes from the darkness beyond. For one moment the eyes of the Indian sparkle brightly; then all is as before. The cry of the horned-owl is by no means uncommon, and human throat never so successfully counterfeited nature.

Through the smoke-wreath of his own creating, the savage glances toward his companions. They are eating—appeasing the hunger caused by a long day's march. Four in number, one sits apart from the rest. The solitary, is a woman. The others *voyageurs*.

Again the Indian starts, and turns his eyes to the right, riveting them upon a small clump of bushes that grow beside the murmuring creek. A bright glare flashes in his face—a sharp, venomous report breaks the air.

Dropping his pipe, the savage sprung erect, every muscle of his almost gigantic frame quivering violently. A wild, shrill yell breaks from his lips, sounding horribly upon the night. The cry ends in a choking gurgle. A stream of blood gushes from his lips. Flinging aloft his arms, the Indian falls forward upon his face, covering the fire with his body. The embers hiss and sputter as the hot life-blood falls upon them, but the red-skin heeds not their searing touch. He is dead—shot through the heart by an unseen enemy.

"To cover l!" yelled one of the voyageurs, as he sprung to the side of the woman who appears paralyzed with fear, lift-

her like an infant in his strong arms, darting to the shelter afforded by the stunted trees and bushes.

"Hellow thar—you fellers!"

The voice, clear and sharp, came from the clump of bushes out of which had sped the death-shot. The answer was prompt and defiant. The rifle of one of the *voyageurs* cracked spitefully, the bullet cutting a twig from the thick-growing bushes.

"Good powder an' lead wasted, my fri'nd," the voice added, quietly. "Enemies ought to be sca'ce in these parts, judgin' by the way you let flicker at them who tries to be fri'nd you."

"A friend—you shot cur guide!" bitterly retorted the man who carried the woman to cover. "Is that the deed of a friend?"

"A trusty guide don't gen'ally lead his empl'yers straight into a ambush, like that varmint was a-doin'. But look here —no stockin' the keerds. One o' your pards is creepin' round by the dead pines, tryin' to git a crack at me. Ef he tries to pass the stub, he's my meat, though I don't hanker a'ter white blood, even 'f 'tis that o' a Frencher. Tell the imp to halt, or I let you take your own trail, an' that leads to death," sharply cried the strange voice.

"La Pard—lie low and wait. Now, sir, who and wha are you?" added the *voyageur*.

"A fri'nd, as I told you afore," testily.

"We have only your word for that," doubtfully.

"It's the word o' a white man; of one, too, that ain't used to takin' so much trouble for strangers. But you've got a gal 'long 'ith you. Only for her, I wouldn't 'a' pestered my nead about ye. But she deserves a better fate than the one that Cree was a-leadin' her to."

"You speak in riddles, stranger," impatiently cried the *voyageur*.

"I'll come out an' answer 'em ef Miss, yander, 'll promise you won't come Injun over me."

"We'll give you a chance to prove what you say, but if you fail, I'll avenge the death of our guide with my own hand!" cried the clear, mellow voice of the woman.

"Lay down your weapons, first," added the *voyageur*.

" You ax too big odds, Frencher," said the stranger, as he quietly stepped out from his covert. " Only for *her* word, I wouldn't 'a' trusted you this fur. Come out from your river. I give you my word I'm alone here."

The stranger advanced and rolled the body of the slain guide from off the embers, then pushed the brands together with his feet. The fire quickly leaped up, throwing a bright glare upon the man's face and form. Curiously, almost anxiously, the concealed parties scrutinized him.

Though an old man, as the long, thin locks of almost snowy whiteness, that hung upon his shoulders, plainly attested, the stranger moved with the lithe suppleness of a panther. But little, if any, above the mean height, a casual observer would have accounted him a man of ordinary muscle and powers. But a trainer of pedestrians or pugilists would have decided differently. He would have said: this man is a wonder; he gains strength, wind and activity with age, instead of losing them. At sixty years, the stranger was fully as "good a man" as at half that number.

His dress was that of a north-western hunter and trapper—composed mainly of skins, Indian tanned; moccasins, trousers, *wammus*, and cap. His face was brown and weather-beaten, wrinkled and gaunt. His eyes resembled living coals—more like the orbs of a maniac than those of a sane person.

One hand rested upon the muzzle of a short, heavy rifle, of large bore. In the leather belt at his waist hung a short butcher-knife and Indian tomahawk of large size. Against either hip rested a revolver—Colt's navy pattern. The man was a walking arsenal.

This was what the voyageurs saw, and then, as if satisfied that no treachery was intended, they stepped toward the fire. Behind them, her hand clasping a small, silver-mounted revolver, came the woman.

" So, you're the man that shot this poor devil?" at length uttered the voyageur who had taken upon himself the post of spokesman from the first.

" Just so," was the quiet reply.

" First, what's your name? There's something familiar in your face. Where have we met before?"

" A body listenin' would take you for a schoolmaster, an

me for the boy. But for this onc't I'll make answer. I was christened Kit Duncan—my fri'nds call me Old Kit; then the Injuns hes got other names for me, which don't matter to you, I reckon. You did see me—at Fort Pitt—two years ago. The Crees driv' us out o' the trapping-grounds—me an' a couple o' greenhorns, a Omaha chief, an' two squaws.* I've see'd you since, though you didn't know it."

"I remember now. Karawee, the great chief of the Plain Crees, made a big fuss about it, threatening to attack the fort if you were not given up to him. But let that pass. Why did you shoot Wanou, here?"

"I did it to save the gal's life, or, 'tany rate, her freedom. But I'll tell you the hull thing ef you'll only stop your pesky clickety-clack long enough. Ax what questions you want to, a'terwards."

A gesture from the woman checked the words that were upon the voyageur's tongue. Duncan glanced quickly at her face through the gathering darkness, then spoke:

"It cain't matter none to you, what my business is in these parts, a'ter I say that it ain't nothin' a white man need be ashamed of. I see a good deal more than most other men in these parts do; but I never crossed the trail o' a dirtier pack o' varmints than I did this day. Afcre I say any more, jest tell me ef I've got the co-reck idee. You fellers air hired by old Francois Ampere. You jest come from St. Paul, whar he sent you a'ter his da'ter. This is the one I mean," and he nodded toward where the young woman stood.

"True—I am Lucille Ampere. But resume."

"Two days ago you was met by this car'on here. He hed a note from the old man tellin' you to trust him, as he was a good guide an' thought a heap of by the Crees, who was beginnin' to grow more sassyer than ever. Guided by him, the varmints wouldn't dar' tetch you. Right?"

"Yes; but you have shot the guide sent us!"

"Not much; or ef I did, 'twasn't the one sent by Ampere. Thar—don't jabber. Let me tell it all. Nigh three hours ago, I was scoutin' along a stream that crosses your trail, some ten mile from this. I found sign—foller'd it up ontel

* See Beadle's Dime Novel, No. 288, "The Lone Chief."

I kem onto a wheen o' Cree imps, an' some—one anyhow—whose paint kivered a white hide. I played snake an' manidged to git nigh enough to hear them talk, fer I knew the lingo. I soon made out they was waitin' fer somebody. Then that somebody come; it was the same varmint as is layin' here now.

"One—a white-skin, as I could tell by his talk, though he spoke the lingo fa'rly—who 'peared like he was the boss 'the outfit, axed the red-skin a good many questions. From the answer I made out this much:

"That he had joined you, an' none o' you 'spect'd the part he was playin'. That you was layin' by on the trail, 'cause one o' the men was suddenly tuck sick. The varmints laughed then, as your guide told how 'cute he had played doctor, 'th the three-toed snake-weed. He putt it on the meat the man ett at noon."

The voyageurs started and interchanged looks of surprise. Quietly smiling, the stranger continued:

"Then the painted white man told the red-skin what he must do. He was to come back here, as ef he had only bin huntin'. A'ter dark he was to doctor your firearms, by pluggin' up the tubes. Afore daylight, the sick man would feel all right an' ready fer travelin', sence the dose o' the weed was only big enough to give him the cramps fer a while. The red-skin was to guide you by the Dead Pine ford. At that ford the ambush was to be laid. When you crossed, the Crees were to nab you, killin' the men, so they wouldn't tell tales. Then the traitor was to git his pay; but I don't reckon he'll ever call fer it, o' *them*, anyhow," grimly eying the stark corpse.

"And I—what was to be my fate?" demanded Lucille, her tones slightly faltering.

"You wasn't to be killed," slowly replied Duncan. "The Injun with the white skin said you was to be *his'n*. I reckon you kin guess at his meanin'."

"This is a strange story you tell," hastily uttered the tall voyageur; "and one that does not sound very probable. Why should this party take so much trouble, when—if Wanou was really such a traitor—they could easily surprise us in camp as we slept?"

"They didn't seem to look on it as a trouble to lay thar in hidin' an' wait fer you to ride blindfold into thar hands. You know yourself that the Cree lodges is nigh the big river. It'd only be so much furder to take you as captives. Then the traitor needed to-night to fix your weapons. By noon to-morrow the ford would be reached. I don't see the trouble, in that."

At a motion from Lucille, Andre, the tall voyageur, stepped aside. Evidently they were consulting together. Duncan looked curiously toward them, though plainly impatient. Then Andre returned.

"What course do you advise us to pursue, then?"

"Fust, I'd hide this car'on in the drink, yender, an' kiver up the blood-marks. Then I'd move furder on, to one side, an' camp out fer the night, sence any one kin see yender man ain't fit to stand a forced march. With daylight, I'll show you another ford, higher up, whar you kin cross in safety. Then the trail is open afore you to the post o' old Ampere."

"What proof have we that you are any better than you say Wanou was? What proof that this is not a trick—that the ambush does not lie at *your* ford, instead of his?"

"Oh, *durn* sech a fault-findin', question-axin' fool! You wouldn't b'lieve Moses hisself, would ye, unless he brung fellers to sw'ar that what he said was gospil!"

"You can not blame us for being slow to trust a stranger, whose first act is to shoot one of our number from ambush. The wonder is that we listened to you at all," interposed Lucille.

"And ef I hedn't bin a fri'nd, you wouldn't 'a' hed the chaince. Don't you see, I hed the bulge on ye, from the word git-up. You didn't know I was in miles o' this. The red-skin didn't 'spect nothin' ontel he heard me cock my rifle. As you see, I kerry revolvers. With them I could 'a' wicked off each one o' you afore you could 'a' made kiver. Why didn't I? Because, though I bain't got overly much love fer you Kanucks, I hate the Plain Crees more, an' it'd spite them to spile thar plans. Thar youhev the hull matter in a nutshell. B'lieve it or leave it, jest as you like. I've did my part."

The old man paused, leaning carelessly upon the muzzle of his rifle. The voyageurs interchanged glances. Then Lucille broke the silence, saying:

"I believe you have told the truth, Mr. Duncan. But if you play us false, may God reward you accordingly!"

"Amen, Miss, an' thar's my hand on it. You needn't be afeard to take it. Thar's blood on it, I know; plenty o' blood both from red an' white skins, but they was all men-critters, able to take keer o' tharselves. Ye see I fit in the 7th Kansas Cavalry, ag'in' the secesh. I al'ays tried to do my duty. Sence then I hain't struck a white man."

"I will shake hands with you. I don't b'lieve you are false."

"You only do me jestice, Miss. I'll see you safe through this, ef you'll only trust to me. I didn't keer much, whether I lent a hand or not, ontel I saw you, fer thar ain't overly much love fer my feller-critters left in my karkidge, now. It's b'en two y'ars sence the change kem over me. Sence that, I hain't done much but hunt fer— But thar—you must excuse a old man, whose tongue is longer 'n his wits. It don't matter to you what my story is, or my life hes b'en—"

"But I am really curious to know more. There is something about you that strangely interests me—"

"Not now—sometime, mebbe, I may tell you more. Then you'll see that I hain't all the black devil men paint me. But thar—enough."

Old Kit turned abruptly away, and lifting the corpse of the guide from the ground, carried it to the creek bank. A goodly sized boulder was securely bound to the body, then the victim of the stranger's deadly aim sunk with a splash beneath the dark surface. The few blood-stains were carefully obliterated, the fire extinguished.

While thus engaged, Old Kit was closely watched by the still suspicious voyageurs. His story, so remarkable in itself, had not satisfied them. It was with difficulty that they could refrain from at once avenging the death of the Cree guide.

"Patience, comrades," muttered Andre, "we will have our revenge upon him. The first step of treachery shall lead to

his grave. We are not children, to be blinded with a pinch of dust."

"True—this is not our first trail. But then, how could he learn all about us so correctly? That puzzles me."

"And me, as well. But remember, La Pard, we are not to sleep this night. Antoine must, that he may be able to do his duty to-morrow, or when the trouble comes. But we must watch this stranger like a cat. Yet use caution. There is a devil in his eye that I don't like."

By this time the two voyageurs had prepared the horses for the road. It was evident that the ride must be a brief one, for, now that the excitement was past, Antoine was groaning in agony. Still he managed to cling to the saddle, his horse led by Old Kit.

"You think there is danger of an attack to-night, then?" asked Lucille, in a low tone, addressing the new guide.

"No, I don't. Most likely thar was no need o' this move, but it's best to be on the safe side. It's barely possible that the white Injun may send a scout out to take a look ef all is as the Cree told him. Then if I was to be found with you, in place o' the red-skin, they'd know thar plan was blowed upon, an' 'd make diff'runt 'rangements. But this'll give us start enough to go 'round 'em."

A mile further on the little party came to a halt, in a goodly sized grove of trees. The horses were securely tethered, but no fire was lighted.

Old Kit announced his intention of standing guard. No one objected; but Andre and La Fard, their weapons carefully examined, also took up their stations, where every motion of the old man could be observed. Duncan smiled grimly, but did not speak. He read their purpose aright. Suspicious still, they were on their guard against treachery.

But little slumber visited any in the camp that night. Lucille could not sleep. A painful foreboding filled her heart and mind. She felt that danger filled the air—danger that particularly threatened herself.

CHAPTER II.

SUSPICIONS REVIVED.

THE brightness of the moon and stars paled before the gray light of approaching dawn, and, almost unconsciously, the voyageurs drew a long breath of relief as they realized that the night had passed without further confirming their suspicions. Yet, while Old Kit crouched over the tiny fire he had built, cooking a bit of meat for the still slumbering maiden, the voyageurs consulted together in low, earnest tones, with more than one uneasy, doubting glance toward the man who had so strangely joined them.

These looks were not unnoticed by Duncan, and a bitter smile curled his thin lips, as he read their purport. But the angry contempt that glittered in his eyes, died abruptly away as he turned round at the sound of a light footstep. Lucille Ampere stood before him.

The long night of foreboding that had just passed, had left but slight trace upon the maiden. Her cheeks might be a shade less rich in color, nothing more.

Though Lucille could not be exactly termed beautiful by those who advocate a strictly classical regularity of features, few would deny that she was lovely—bewitchingly so. A pure brunette, she had that rich, clear complexion, so seldom found save in the children of a tropic clime. Her eyes were large, lustrous, black as the berry of the black-thorn. At times they could flash and glow with an angry fire that, in one so lovely, awed the beholder. Then again, though as yet a stranger to the sentiment, they could fill with the soft, voluptuous light of love, dreamy, yet bewildering—maddening.

Emerging from the little brush hut that had been hastily erected for her accommodation by the thoughtful Andre, Lucille was binding up the glossy, waving masses of jet-black hair that shrouded her form to the waist. Standing thus, in the gray light of dawn, with arms uplifted, her trim, shapely form was revealed to advantage. About the average height of

woman, her form was full, rounded and symmetrical—a form full of fire, energy, and rounded gracefulness. For three years Lucille had lived in St. Paul, under the tuition of Madame La Brunierie; but that was not sufficient to entirely destroy the natural gracefulness gained by a life in the wilderness for nearly seventeen years previously.

Lucille passed by Duncan with merely a cold nod and "good-morning," addressing Andre in low, guarded tones. The eyes of the old man glittered brightly, but then he turned away, calmly smoking his pipe.

"It's plain enough howt'll eend," he muttered, beneath his breath. "They think I'm tryin' to bamboozle 'em. I wouldn't keer, only fer the gal—she's too pritty to fall into that pesky white Injun's grup. I'll save her, ef they don't rub it in too hard. I've swallered a heap, a'ready."

The little party broke their fast in silence. A constraint seemed to rest upon them. Suspicion was at work. The voyageurs seemed to look upon the old man as a secret enemy, who was playing a part, the better to accomplish his ends. Yet the influence of their employer's daughter prevented an open rebellion upon their part.

"Mr. Duncan," said Lucille, as the voyageurs proceeded to prepare the horses for travel; "you spoke of crossing the river by another ford. How much longer is that route than the trail we were following?"

"Mebbe ten miles—mebbe a dozen."

"You believe that to be the safest course?"

"I know it. Ambusin is laid at the other one. 'F you try that, you'll be the only one that'll cross the drink *alive*. An' you'll be let do it only because wuss 'n death is in store fer ye on t'other side," was the earnest reply.

Andre assisted Lucille into her saddle, and then the little party rode after the old man, who led the way at a rapid pace, nearly at right-angles with their former course.

For an hour or more this course was followed in silence, broken only by the tread of horses' hoofs along the tangled trail, and the low whisperings of the voyageurs, who had fallen slightly behind Lucille. Their countenances were dark and troubled. Their suspicions that all was not right were gaining strength with each forward step.

Duncan noticed this, and pressed on with increased speed. He was anxious to gain a certain point before the mutiny broke forth openly. But in this hope he was disappointed.

"Halt!" suddenly cried Andre, in a loud tone.

Lucille instinctively drew rein, glancing anxiously from the guide to the voyageurs. Duncan paused, his brow deeply corrugated. He read aright the determined faces of the voyageurs. As though instinctively, one hand loosened the revolvers at his waist. Then he said :

"What's to pay now, Frencher?"

"Grouche La Pard, watch that man. If he attempts to move, shoot him like he shot Wanou," sternly cried Andre.

The voyageur flung forward his rifle. Quick as thought, Old Kit covered the man, the click of his rifle sounding significantly, as the hammer was raised. Lucille urged her horse between the two, her hands uplifted, a revolver gleaming brightly in the rays of the sun.

"Hold! The first man that fires dies by my hand! Andre, what is the meaning of this?"

"It means, lady, that we are resolved not to see you led into a snare by that man. I believe that *he* is the traitor, instead of Wanou, whom he murdered."

"Kanuck, you lie when you say that," angrily cried Kit. "Let the gal stan' aside, an' I'll stuff it down your or'nary, frog-eatin' gullet!"

"Peace—this matter must be settled now, but not by such means. Andre, what new reasons have you for what you say?" demanded Lucille.

"Look at the trail—it leads us up into the rock-hills, almost directly away from the Post. The Blood Indians range there. Once among the hills, we would never come out alive. Is that the act of a friend?"

"The trail turns ag'in, a mile or two on. I am guidin' ye over the easiest ground," quietly returned Duncan.

"You heard the story this man told us, last night, lady. Is it not a very improbable one? Both the Wood and the Plain Crees are at peace now with the whites. It is through the fur-traders that they gain their goods without being obliged to pass through the country of their enemies, the Blackfeet and Sioux tribes, to sell them, as they were once. Is it likely,

then, that they would strike such a blow at a tracer as this would be? Wanou brought a paper from your father, bidding us trust implicitly to his guidance. This man murders him from ambush, then proclaims the dead a traitor. Is it better to believe your father or a stranger?"

"Old Ampere sent a *Wood Cree* to you, not a *Ptain Cree*. This Wanou killed him, an' tuck his paper," quietly added Duncan.

"Mademoiselle Lucille, you have known me from childhood —since you first learned to walk. You should know by this time whether or no I love you. As our blessed Lady hears me, I would lay down my life at any moment to shield you from harm. Then I pray you, take warning in time. I believe this man is playing a treacherous part, and means to betray us into the hands of enemies, *his* friends. It is not yet too late to return to the safe trail. And when the ford is reached, it will be easy to reconnoiter first, then, if there is danger, to retreat unseen."

"Thar, Kanuck, you hev said yer say; now let me hev mine. Miss, as the good God above hears me, what that man hev said is all lies, whether he means it so or not. I told you the truth about the ambush at the ford. Ef you go back by that trail, it'll be to *death, or wuss*. Trust in me, an' I'll put you safe in the old man's arms afore another day. Ef not, good-by. Now take your ch'ice."

"Your words sound like those of truth," slowly replied Lucille. "But you can not blame me for choosing the guidance of a life-long friend before that of a stranger."

"I'm sorry, Miss—sorrier than I ever thought my old heart could be, to see a feller-critter ridin' with eyes shet onto sart'in death and destruction. But you've chose, an' I don't complain. Go your way—but remember, when the time comes that the old man did his best to save ye. You'll know then that I was right—but the knowledge 'll come too late," sadly replied the stranger, as he turned to depart.

"Halt!" cried Andre, leveling his rifle. "You can't leave us this way. It's ill policy turning one's back upon a foe in the woods. You must go with us."

"Must? That's a big word, Kanuck, an' one that I've 'most fergot the meanin' of. I reckon you fergot yourself a

ettle, didn't ye?" quietly retorted Kit, turning around, with finger upon trigger.

"I said you must go with us, and I meant it. Or, if not, we'll leave you as you left Wanou—*dead!*"

"So that's your game, is it, Kanuck?" and Duncan's eyes flashed vividly. "I've out-faced bigger odds than three to one, in my day, an' I ain't too old to do it ag'in—so pitch your jinny!"

For the second time that day Lucille rode in between the leveled rifles, checking the quarrel. With cocked revolver he enforced her words:

"Lower your weapons, or I fire! There shall be no blood-shed here while I can prevent it. Andre Genlis, lead the way back to this trail we have abandoned. And you, old man, go your way. If you have acted the part of a true friend, may God bless you; if not, *He* will punish you, even though you escape here below."

Though with evident reluctance, the tall voyageur and his comrades obeyed the mandate of their young mistress. Then Lucille rode after them.

Kit Duncan stood motionless, leaning upon his rifle, gazing after the little party as they moved through the shrubbery and thick-lying rocks. A look of pain rested upon his weather-beaten countenance.

"They go to meet thar death!" he muttered, hoarsely. "An' all fer that durned, chuckle-headed fool yender! It'd be a marcy to drop him outen the saddle—but no. Let 'em go. The Crees 'll show 'em I was in the right," and then, in silence, he watched them until they vanished from view around a grove of trees.

As the third voyageur rounded the point, Old Kit dropped his gaze and seemed buried in a profound study. But this lasted only for a moment. The deep frown changed to a look of steadfast resolution; his look became once more that of a daring, energetic man.

"Thar's one more chaince—an' I'll try it, too! Pity sech a nice gal as she is should be rubbed out just through the or'inary cussedness o' them Kanucks. Mehbe I kin save her yet—an' here goes fer a try, anyhow!"

While muttering this, Duncan was tightening the belt

around his waist, and adjusting his weapons as if preparing for a race. At the ends of the revolver-scabbards hung several leathern thongs. These he passed round each thigh, securely knotting them. Thus, even when at top-speed, the pistols were held stationary, unable to dangle or sway awkwardly, or drop from their sheaths.

"Now, legs, do your duty," said Duncan, as he started forward at a rapid pace.

The course he followed was a medium one; that is, about half way between the one first taken by the voyageurs and that by which he had wished to guide them. Bending his head, Old Kit ran in long, swinging strides that seemed to sway his body from side to side. In this gait it was easier to avoid the interposing obstacles, rocks, shrubs, or decaying logs.

The lightness with which the weight of full sixty years sat upon the old hunter was plainly evident now, as he ran with the activity and suppleness of youth. Mile after mile of the rocky, uneven, tangled ground was traversed without pause or hesitation. Yet the weather-beaten face was barely moistened with sweat, his breath came even and quietly. In more than one respect Kit Duncan was a remarkable man.

Old Kit only paused in his race against time when the bright glitter of the Saskatchewan river met his gaze. With a quick, searching glance upward, his face relaxed in a grim smile.

"Not over an hour, the sun says. Thar's a little sand left in the old man's craw yit, anyhow. Le's see; from the looks, the ford ain't quite half a mile b'low here. I've got a good hafe a hour to work in, fer I traveled at least two foot to thar one. The trail's rough fer hoss-critters. The time's short, but I reckon it'll do. It *must* do—or good-by to our pritty gal!"

The banks of the river were quite densely wooded at this point. Nearly fifty feet below the level ran the broad, rapid stream. The southern bank—that upon which Old Kit now stood—was considerably higher than the one opposite. Both sloped abruptly down to the water, at all places difficult to scale, at some, impossible.

Along this bank Duncan glided at a rapid pace, keeping well covered from view of any one who might chance to be upon the further shore. As he proceeded the ground gradually sunk, until scarcely a score feet above the river's level. He was drawing near the ford.

Peering out from a dense clump of shrubbery that grew beside the faintly-defined trace, Duncan narrowly scanned the further shore, where he knew that an ambush was formed. All was still and motionless save the usual forest sounds—the sighing of the faint breeze, the occasional note of a bird, the chirp of insects and the murmuring of the river, as it sped along its way, bound to the great lakes.

A narrow, valley-like depression here seemed to cross the river, extending into the forest upon either shore, with a gentle slope to the water's edge, thickly studded with vine-clad shrubbery. A level bridge of sand-colored rock crossed the river, some half-dozen yards in width, over which the water rapidly flowed, scarce two feet in depth. But above and below this the water was deep and swift. As if to render crossing the more easy, the river banks were here contracted until scarce fifty yards apart. Below, they once more spread out, in places a mile apart.

As Duncan closely scanned the further shore, a fiery gleam lit up his eye. A dense bush trembled, then parted, as a man passed through it, with a quick glance across the river. The bright sun shone upon a polished, oily skin, deep bronze in hue. A feather-bedded scalp-lock also proclaimed the savage.

Stooping, the Indian sunk down upon his hands and knees, his face bent to the clear, sparkling water. Intent only upon quenching his thirst, he did not notice the rustling of the bush that sheltered the old man, nor see the black rifle-muzzle that was leveled toward him.

"It's a cussed Plain Cree," gritted Duncan, his face transformed into that of a very demon. "'Tain't jest what I wanted, put he's brought it on bisself—an' then *it's one more fer pore Sam!*'"

As the last words passed his tightly-clenched teeth, Duncan pressed the trigger—the hammer fell—the rifle exploded. Like a stricken deer, the savage sprung to his

feet, standing stiffly erect, glaring wildly across the river, where arose the light blue curl of smoke. The hot life-blood ran down and trickled from the end of the long scalp-lock.

One moment the death-stricken savage stood thus, then, with a shrill, horrible shriek, fell forward upon his face, the swift current bearing him from the shore.

Mingled with the rifle-report and death-yell, a quick, sharp, half-stifled cry arose from the undergrowth from which the Indian had emerged, and several saplings swayed and bowed their crests ; then all was silent as death.

As he fired, Old Kit dropped quickly back, gliding behind a goodly-sized bowlder. Peering over the top of this, he noted the trembling bushes, and knew that his suspicions were correct. A grim smile curled his lips as all became still once more. He read aright the motives of the dead brave's comrades. But that did not suit his purpose.

Dextrously reloading his rifle the while, he raised his voice and called aloud, using the dialect spoken by the Plain Crees.

" Ho ! she-dogs of the Plain Crees—open your ears to the words of a warrior. I shot a skunk, jest now, that had stolen the shape of a man. I hang my head in shame. Come and breathe upon me, that I may die for having been such a fool. Ho ! squaw dogs, go back to your lodges and tell your people that you heard the voice of a man and trembled—that you looked upon his face, and fled in fear ! See ! I am DEATH-TRAILER !"

As he uttered these last words, Old Kit leaped upon the bowlder, standing erect, raising his cap. A chorus of angry, demoniac yells arose from the further shore at this action, and a dozen puffs of smoke shot through the line of bushes.

With lightning quickness Old Kit flung himself backward to the ground. Even as he fell, he distinctly heard the sharp whistle of the ragged bullets forced from grooved barrels cutting the air above his head.

Again the yells arose from the ambush, now sharp and exultant, as the Crees beheld their bitter foe fall to the ground, apparently dead or dying, and then the bushes were dashed

aside, and a full score savages leaped down into the shallow water, each madly striving to be the lucky one who was first to touch the scalp of Death-Trailer.

The foremost savage was half-way across the ford, when Duncan suddenly arose to his feet, with leveled rifle, uttering a taunting laugh of defiance. Instinctively the Crees paused, but then the rifle cracked, and one of their number was swept from the ledge, struggling in the agonies of death.

"Ho! Death-Trailer laughs at such cowardly squaws!" said Old Kit, laughing loudly.

Several reports came from the further shore. One bullet severs a few strands of the silvery hair beside his ear. Laughing still, he shakes his head, then with an insulting gesture, turns and walks away.

Fired to madness the Crees spring forward in hot pursuit, despite a commanding voice that calls them back. The scourge of their tribe is before them. Burning for vengeance, they dash recklessly on, as the taunting laugh again comes to their ears.

Up the slope—through the bushes, they press. Just crossing a narrow belt of open ground they see the Death-Trailer. Opening like hounds upon a breast-high scent, they dash on.

Old Kit smiles grimly. He sees that his ruse bids fair to succeed. Of his own danger, he little cares.

"'Twill leave the ford clear," he mutters, then dashes on.

CHAPTER III.

A DARING DEED.

LUCILLE AMPERE rode slowly after the voyageurs, her mind far from being at ease. There was something in the tone of the old man that strangely impressed her, nor could she entirely choke down a misgiving that her present action was rash and ill-considered. The foreboding of evil that had haunted her dreams of the night just past, returned with redoubled force.

Nor were the three voyageurs any more at ease, though they had carried one of their points. Muttering discontentedly together, they said that the old man should never have been left free to work out his evil plans. By trapper law his life was forfeited—he should have died.

"But," added Andre Genlis, with a significant shrug, as he glanced back over his shoulder, "one could do no more then. After all 'tis only a little harder riding, and we will pass the ford before this old decoy can move his allies there. So on—ride briskly."

The trail they had abandoned for so short a time was regained, and then the little party pressed on at a fair gait. Despite their protestations, the voyageurs were not so entirely convinced that no danger lurked in the path before them. As the distance grew less, they began secretly wondering whether the stranger had really been deceiving them, and if not, speculating upon the result of the attempt at crossing the ford in the face of an ambush. But these were secret thoughts. Outwardly, the trio laughed at the idea of danger threatening from the peaceful tribes of Wood and Plain Cree.

At one time Andre abruptly checked his horse, signaling his commander to do likewise, then bent his ear in acute attention. But all was still, and he rode on, relieved.

The sound that came so faintly to his ear was nothing less than the firing at the ford. The trampling of iron-shod hoofs upon the flinty soil deadened the first sounds, and all was over ere the voyageurs hearkened.

Retracing their steps had consumed more time than even Old Kit had allowed, and the party were over an hour behind time, at the moment when he discharged his first shot, at the ford. Over the rough, broken ground, the horses could only pick their way deliberately.

Nearing the ford, Andre fell back alongside Lucille.

"No I have noticed no sign, mademoiselle," he quickly said, in reply to the questioning look. "I merely wish to tell you what I consider right should be done. Though I don't believe there was a breath of truth in the wild story that man told us; a true servant never leads his employer into danger blindfold. I promised your father that I would take every precaution in my power to bring you safely to his

arms. For that reason, more than because I think here is any real need of it, I mean to reconnoiter the ford, while you and my comrades remain at a safe distance."

"Go, then, good leader, but be cautious. I can scarcely tell why, but there is a heavy weight upon my heart, as though the shadow of some great peril was settling over me. I know your fidelity, and trust in it; but something tells me that we did wrong to scorn that strange man's warning," replied Lucille, her brow clouded.

"'Tis a shadow that will soon blow away—a foreboding at which you will lightly laugh, an hour hence. But see! yonder hill overlooks the river. Keep close to La Pard, lady. He will understand my signals," and then the garrulous voyageur urged forward his animal, gradually distancing the others, until lost to sight along the shaded trail.

When the first glimpse of the river met his eye, he dismounted, leaving the well-trained horse to itself, gliding silently forward. Either he was a poor scout, or else felt so confident that that there was no danger to be apprehended as to scorn unusual precaution, for Andre overlooked signs that might otherwise have changed the entire course of events that followed. Feeling assured that if an ambush was really laid it would be upon the further side, where a deadly blow would be dealt as the passers attempted to leave the water, Genlis turned his entire attention thither, unheeding the footprints of the voyageurs who had darted after Death-Trailer.

Keenly, searchingly he scrutinized the further shore. All was still and apparently harmless. The forest seemed unoccupied. A grim smile curled the voyageur's grizzled mustache.

He rose erect and strode out to the water's edge, boldly facing the further shore. The action showed that he was no coward, however reckless.

Placing one hand to his lips, he uttered the signal that bade Grouche La Pard advance—that the coast was clear. Then, waiting no longer, Andre entered the water, crossing over the water-laved rock bridge. Half-way across, he uttered a low, grim laugh. It revealed his utter contempt for the warning of the old man.

Turning, as the shore was reached, he glanced back. His companions were just appearing in view.

"Antoine, he called out, "fetch my horse with you."

"Have you reached the woods then Andre?" said Lucille.

"There is little need, but I will, to satisfy you," was his reply, as he sprung lightly up the gentle slope, disappearing from their view amidst the vine-clad bushes.

Though with their doubts greatly relieved by his words, the trio awaited the result in considerable suspense. For a moment they were startled as a slight noise came to their ears from the point where Andre had disappeared, but then all was still. Perhaps the voyageur had tripped and stumbled over a vine or root.

"'Tis all clear—come on over," sounded clearly, and the broad-brimmed hat of Andre was seen waving above the shrubbery.

"Thank God! our fears were groundless!" fervently exclaimed Lucille, as she urged her horse down the slope, after her companions.

Antoine entered the water first, leading Andre's horse. The animal did not take to the water kindly, snorting and pulling back. The voyageurs' entire attention was occupied by him. Behind them rode Lucille, laughing merrily at their struggles.

After a brief struggle, the animal calmed down, and followed quietly. The voyageurs glanced ahead. Through the bushes they caught sight of the form of their comrade, apparently watching them, from beneath his slouched hat.

Then Grouche La Pard uttered a startled cry. Close beside the motionless form of Genlis, something bright fluttered. It resembled the plumed head-dress of a savage. Only for a moment this was visible—then it vanished. Could it be fancy? Surely! else why did Andre stand there so calmly and motionless?

The answer came speedily. The figure of the tall voyageur became suddenly agitated, twisting and twirling like one struggling in strong and powerful hands. The hat fell off, revealing his pale, convulsed features, and then his voice, strained and unnatural, shouted out a warning:

"*Flee for your lives! The Indians—*"

His words were abruptly cut short. An arm, showing red in the sunlight, clasping a bared knife, suddenly rose and

fell, Andre Genlis fell backward, with a gasping, gurgling cry.

Astounded, bewildered, the voyageurs heard and saw this. Then the terrible truth flashed upon their minds, and a despairing cry broke from their lips, as they wrenched their animals' heads around.

But that was their last action in this life. A rattling volley from the shore drowned their voices. Without a groan, Antoine and La Pard sunk forward, their heads drooping, their nerveless hands dropping the bridle-reins, their hot life-blood patterning upon the soiled water beneath the horses' feet.

Snorting madly, terror-stricken by the wild yells that closely followed the death-volley, the animals reared and plunged through the shallow water, heading toward the shore they had just left. Cast from their blood-stained saddles, the death-stricken voyageurs plashed into the water, their bodies, still quivering, rolling over and over, until drawn by the swift current into the deep water below the ford.

For the moment, paralyzed with terror, Lucille had witnessed the struggles of Andre Genlis, the venomous blow that struck him down and silenced his warning; and then the volley of rifle-bullets that cut short the lives of the other two voyageurs.

She was shaken from this half-stupor by the horrible shriek uttered by her horse, and its mad plungings. As it sunk to its knees, Lucille was cast nearly out of her saddle, upon the animal's neck, but fortunately she clung desperately to mane and reins, even through her terror.

Through the spray, cast upon the air by the confused plunging and trampling, the maiden caught a glimpse of a number of dusky, half-clad, paint-bedaubed forms as they broke cover and dashed down the slope toward the water, yelling in mad, devilish exultation.

This sight partially restored her senses, by showing her the full extent of her peril. Desperately she jerked upon the bridle-rein. Aided by the strong, jaw-breaking curb, her horse strugglingly gained his feet. At this moment one of the other horses, which until now had been dancing wildly around upon the rock ledge, catching sight of the yelling savages, wheeled to flee, violently rushing against that ridden

by Lucille. Both horse and rider fell heavily beneath the shock, rolling over and over.

Partially stunned, bruised though she was, Lucille still clung to the saddle, and managed to regain her seat, as the animal rose erect, swimming frantically, in the deep water below the ford. Snorting convulsively, its head barely above water, the animal swept rapidly down the swift current. Lucille had lost all control over its motions. The reins, broken, escaped her hand.

Even in that terrible moment she calculated her chances of life. They were woefully faint. Savages yelled upon the bank, and plashed through the water. Her horse was rapidly failing, for she could see the blood that streamed from its nostrils. She knew that it had received its death-blow. A cry of despair broke from her lips. All seemed lost!

From behind came the rapid plunges, as several savages leaped from the rock-ledge into deep water, swimming rapidly after to rescue her from drowning. And for what? Lucille shuddered at the thought. Better death in the cold embrace of the mighty Saskatchewan, than a rescue that would doom her to outrage and dishonor!

The story told by Kit Duncan had been truthful in every respect. The ford was ambushed; the object was to capture Lucille Ampere under such circumstances as would render it easy to cast the blame upon the Blackfeet Indians, rather than the real perpetrators, a body of Plain Crees, led by a white renegade. To guard against her escape by the speed of her horse, the renegade had aimed at the animal's heart. Another bullet had broken its fore-leg. Though mortally wounded, the brute struggled nobly.

A cry of terror broke from the maiden's lips as she saw a small canoe dart out from the bush-lined shore, heading so as to intercept the failing horse. In it was one man, paddling skillfully. The savages behind yelled madly, redoubling their exertions. The boatman shouted aloud in tones that reached her ears, even above the tumult:

"Courage, lady—I will save you! Do just as I bid you, and all will be well."

Along the shore, keeping pace with those in the water, ran a number of paint-bedaubed fiends, yelling, hooting, screeching,

ing like madmen. They were hastily reloading their rifles. They had noticed the canoe-man, and knew that he was attempting the maiden's rescue. That fact marked him as their foe.

"Spring into the water and let the horse go," cried the boatman. "Leap beyond reach of his hoofs, and then trust to me. Quick—now!"

But Lucille did not obey. Nearly paralyzed with terror, if she noticed the near approach of the canoe at all, she believed it contained an enemy—perhaps the "white Injun" spoken of by Old Kit Duncan. She clung to the wet mane with the strength of despair.

The canoe-man uttered a cry of disgust, then cast a quick glance around. Down the current several savages rapidly swam, straining every nerve to overtake the maiden; upon the rock bridge stood others, watching the result with eager interest; along the shore still others ran, reloading the rifles with which they intended picking off the bold adventurer.

This sight resolved the boatman. He saw that Lucille either could not or would not assist him in the rescue, and that he must depend wholly upon his own exertions.

A powerful sweep of the paddles drove the light cockleshell close alongside the struggling horse. Reaching forward, the man flung an arm around the maiden's waist, and strove to lift her from the saddle.

With more leisure, he would have seen the folly of this course. The frail canoe shot from under his feet, casting him into the water. For a moment all three disappeared beneath the surface—man, maiden, and horse.

The Cree yells rung loudly in his ears as they once more rose to the surface. Upon one shoulder lay the half-senseless form of Lucille. The head of the horse appeared several yards below them, sinking and rising with every plunge, with struggles rapidly growing more and more faint as death came nearer.

The young man cast an anxious glance around, as he dashed back the dripping hair from his eyes. The canoe was close at hand, dancing lightly upon the miniature waves. It had not been upset.

With a muttered thanksgiving he swam lustily toward it, clutching the stern with his free hand; then, by an almost superhuman exertion, fairly tossed the limp form of Lucille into the tiny craft. It was no time to think of ceremony. With a skill that betokened thorough acquaintance with this peculiar craft, the young man drew himself into the canoe.

Seizing the paddle, he swept one swift glance around them bent to his work. And truly there was no time to lose.

The swimmers were not a score yards behind the boat. Savages were abreast upon the shore, brandishing their rifles; at least one was aimed at his life at that moment.

The report echoed sharp and clear, and the young man flung back his head with an involuntary cry. The ragged bullet had passed just before his face, so close to the mark that the wind was distinctly felt. For a moment he believed he was shot.

The cry seemed to arouse Lucille, and she raised her head. Instinctively the truth flashed upon her mind, and a glad cry broke from her lips. The swiftly moving boat—the yelling savages; these told her this man was a friend, nobly endeavoring to rescue her from the peril that had almost been fatal.

"Quiet, lady—lie down in the boat," cried the young man, plying the paddle with all the skill and energy at his command. "Those devils are bethinking themselves of their rifles, and a bullet would not respect your sex."

"God have mercy! see!" gasped Lucille, in terror.

She pointed near the bow of the canoe. The frail bark had been broken, and the water was rapidly pouring in at the aperture. Already the bottom was covered.

"Try and stop it with your dress," sharply commanded the young stranger. "We must gain a little more on these hounds, or all is lost. They'd capture us before we could climb the bank."

His quick, decisive words forced Lucille to obey, despite the great terror that possessed her. She pressed a fold of her dress firmly against the opening seam.

Straining every muscle to its utmost extent, the young man plied the paddle with long, powerful sweeps, sending

the light craft through the water with birdlike speed. The stake was a gigantic one; life against death.

The swimmers were being distanced. The savages upon shore could no longer keep pace with the flying canoe, and their angry yells filled the air.

Crack-crack-crack! Like a platoon firing in rotation echoed the reports, and the bullets sped over the water. One perforated the flashing paddle. Others passed through the frail bark, but the occupants of the canoe seemed to bear charmed lives. Not a missile touched either of their persons.

Again a cry of agony came from the maiden's pale lips. A fragment of bark gave way, and the water leaped into the canoe with what seemed an exultant gurgle. Rolling both hands in the folds of her dress, Lucille thrust them through the hole, up to her elbows, but still the water gushed in, and the canoe sunk gradually deeper.

Knowing that this must soon end, the young man turned the prow toward the southern shore, paddling for dear life. The savages yelled exultantly. They believed success was now insured.

While yet several yards from land, the canoe filled and plunged forward, casting the occupants into the river. Seizing Lucille, the young man swam vigorously, a moment later touching bottom. Then, in the same sharp, commanding tone, he said :

"On—climb for your life now! There is still a chance if you do not give way to fear!"

Right nobly Lucille responded, scaling the steep bank, aided by his strong arm, with the activity of a deer. And then they gained the top, panting, yet uninjured.

A glance backward showed them the swimmers nearing the shore above. Others were plunging into the water on the further side. It was now to be a race for life.

"Come—our lives depend upon your courage, now," said the rescuer, hoping to thoroughly arouse Lucille. "If you can bear up for a mile, there is a chance for our escape."

"I'll try—but for the love of God! don't let me fall into their hands alive!" pleaded the maiden.

Grasping her waist the young man darted away from the

river at breakneck speed. Lithe and strong-limbed, Lucille kept pace with him, apparently with ease. He smiled grimly. He saw now that she would not be the fatal incumbrance it at first appeared.

The canoe had stood them in good stead. The ford was fully two miles away. Hence there were only the foot-Indians to deal with. And before they could overtake them, he trusted to reach a point of comparative safety.

On through the trees and undergrowth, over the rocky ground, the fugitives sped, exerting every muscle. The sharp, continuous yells of the Crees came distinctly to their ears. Yet the young stranger continued his brief, broken sentences of cheer, assuring the maiden of ultimate escape.

"Fortunately, I know the ground well. Ten minutes more will carry us to a rocky tract, where they can't trail us. Then you must hide, while I go for help. You know that you can not run clear away from them. Such an attempt would be fatal to us both. You are not afraid? You will trust me?" he said, sentence by sentence, broken and disconnected, yet intelligible.

"I must—what else is there for me?" panted Lucille.

The nature of the ground became more and more broken. Great bowlders strewed the way, among which grew rank shrubbery. Close ahead, rose a small, rocky hill. Toward this the young man headed.

Suddenly pausing, he caught Lucille up in his arms, and then ran on, leaping from rock to rock with the strength and activity of the mountain goat. The moccasined feet left no impression behind them.

By the foot of the mound he paused, resting Lucille upon a flat rock. Parting a dense screen of leaves, he motioned for her to enter. She obeyed, in silence.

"Creep as far back as you can. Take this revolver. The cartridges are waterproof. If you are discovered, use it. Better death by your own hand, than fall alive into their power. I will return as soon as possible. Good-by!"

Then he turned and darted away, at full speed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEATH-TRAILER.

As the taunting laugh of him who had called himself the Death-Trailer floated back to the ears of the Plain Crees, they darted forward at breakneck speed, fairly mad with rage and thirst for vengeance. All else was forgotten in the wild hope that this day might forever relieve their tribe of the bitter scourge that for two years past had so frequently filled their lodges with mourning.

"It don't sound like the hull outfit was a'ter me," the old man muttered, a little uneasily. "Mebbe I'm doin' all this jest for nothin'—'d be jest my luck!"

Though fearing that only a portion of the band had followed him, Old Kit faithfully carried out the plan he had formed. That was to keep the Crees in play until the travelers should have time to gain and cross the river.

Though so swiftly, the hunter ran at ease, evidently well within himself. Yet the vindictive yells of the pursuing Crees did not sound much nearer than at first, though they were straining every nerve to overtake the fugitive. As a tribe, the Plain Crees are not noted for their fleetness of foot.

On through the stunted timber glided the chase. Darting around, slipping under or leaping over logs, boulders and thornbushes, Death-Trailer led the way, occasionally giving vent to his taunting laugh, or sending back a cry that seemed to madden the oncoming Crees. That this was no common enmity existing between them, the actions of both parties in the chase plainly evinced. A few words will explain the cause of this.

Nearly three years before the events narrated in the preceding chapters occurred, a party of four men entered upon a winter's trapping along the Saskatchewan. One was Kit Duncan; another was Samuel Grimes, a tall Yankee. The quartette were close friends, had fought side by side in the late

civil war, from first to last, in the same company. Though often quarreling, Kit and Sam loved each other with a strength and devotion rarely found. The Crees grew troublesome, and after many adventures, Yankee Sam was captured. Kit risked his own life more than once to free his chum, but in vain. Grimes perished at the stake, with horrible tortures. From his hiding-place in the hills, old Kit was an eye-witness to it all. Those hours changed his entire nature, and made him what we now find him—*a life-hunter—a death-trailer.*

After seeing his friends safely to the settlement, Kit Duncan applied himself to fulfilling the vow of vengeance he had made while watching the death-agony of his friend. Night and day he hunted the Plain Crees. Utterly knowing no fear, he let no chance pass him of swelling the list of victims sacrificed to the ashes of his chum. And as the days, weeks, and months rolled on, the Plain Crees learned to tremble at his name—the name of DEATH-TRAILER. They knew him by no other name; as yet they were ignorant of what particular sin had brought the scourge upon them.

As the woods grew more open and free from undergrowth, Death-Trailer began reloading his rifle with a dexterity truly marvelous, only attained by long and persistent practice. A deep, unrelenting fire burned in his eyes. He had resolved to strike another blow at his hated foes—to add another item to the already long list of victims.

With only an occasional yell, the Crees darted along the hot trail. Though in nowise underrating the danger, they had resolved that this day should see the end of their scourge. Knowing that some of their number must fall, still they pressed on. As a tribe, the Plain Crees are undeniably brave. Others may be more skillful in war, but no savage will more courageously face almost certain death than they.

"I greatly misdoubt I hain't made much by this move," muttered Duncan, uneasily. "They don't yelp like the hull outfit war a'ter me. Mebbe enough stayed behind to play the ambush game, a'ter all. But I'll soon see; it's time to give another lick fer pore Sam, anyhow."

His rifle once more in order, Old Kit increased his pace, darting through the tolerably open woods with a speed and adroitness little short of the marvelous. Casting rapid glances

before and upon either hand, he sought a place that spoke fairly for the success of the resolve he had so suddenly formed.

"This is the ticket!" he added, his eyes sparkling vividly.
"Now, varmints, look out fer your skelps!"

Darting across the open belt of ground that seemed to divide the forest into two parts, Death-Trailer plunged into the bushes beyond. But there he abruptly paused, cocking his rifle as he turned round.

The open ground was quite one hundred yards in width, covered with a carpet of soft, thick grass. Not a brush or shrub broke the level; not a boulder marred the smooth, level track.

As he faced around, Duncan beheld the foremost of his pursuers dash out upon the belt. Like shadows, two others followed. For a moment the Crees hesitated, but then, as they caught the plainly-imprinted trail retained by the greensward, they sprung forward, uttering their sharp, disagreeable yells; and Duncan heard it replied to by still others, as they neared the spot.

The leading brave was quite one-third the distance across the belt, when Old Kit leveled his rifle. Quick as thought, the report followed, sharp, clear, vengeful.

The tall, athletic form of the Plain Cree quivered and shrank, as though struck by the lightning's withering breath; but only for one moment. Then the limbs straightened out as the dusky form shot through the air in a wonderful leap, a shrill, agonizing yell breaking the air, as a lifeless corse falls heavily to the ground. Like those of a death-stricken wild beast, were the yell and leap.

Mechanically, the dead man's comrades paused, the event was so sudden and unlooked-for. The point whence sped the death-shot was plainly indicated by the curling wreath of vapor rising above the dense clump of bushes toward which the trail tended. Nor was there any doubt as to who had discharged the fatal bullet.

High above the reverberating echoes of the rifle-shot rung out the shrill, taunting laugh of the man called Death-Trailer. More unearthly than ever it sounded now, but instead of cowing, the peculiar defiance roused the Plain Crees from their

momentary stupor, and repeating their vengeful cries, once more they darted forward. The struggle must end in death; in their mad rage, the Indians forgot their old superstitious fear.

After firing, Death-Trailer eagerly peered from his covert. The brief faltering of the foremost savage gave him time for his purpose. He saw that only some half-dozen braves were following him, of all that had at first set forth in pursuit. The others had either been distanced, or had obeyed the calling yells of their renegade leader.

A bitter curse broke from the old man's lips as he realized the truth, and his teeth ground with disappointed fury. His reckless exposure of life had been without the success it deserved. Those whom he had endeavored to save would still be ambushed at the ford.

The one glance convinced Death-Trailer of this. And then he changed his tactics. Knowing that his efforts could no longer avail the voyageurs and their fair charge, he cleared them from his mind, thinking only of his vow of vengeance. The blood of his murdered friend called for fresh victims.

I find it very difficult to convey a just idea of this character. For many years he had associated with Sam Grimes, sharing with him good-fortune and ill, pleasures and perils, until the bond between them was even stronger than the love of most brothers. Witnessing the horrible death of his friend, without the power to assist or encourage him, had turned the jovial, free-hearted trapper into a very demon of revenge. But one object filled his waking hours—his dreams at night: vengeance, thorough, dark and bloody. At all times daring to a fault, Duncan had grown utterly regardless of life, gladly risking it whenever he saw a chance of adding a victim to the growing list his hand had sacrificed to the memory of his friend.

Casting a quick, searching glance around him, Duncan darted away, bending abruptly to the right. Knowing that nothing could be gained by drawing the Crees further from the ford, he resolved to end the affair. And with that purpose in view, he uttered the taunt that still further maddened his enemies.

"Yelp on, ye imps o' the devil!" the old man muttered,

With a grim smile of deadly significance. "Thar'll be big moanin' an' weepin' in the Cree lodges over this day's work. An' Sam—he'll look down an' laugh, an' say 't Old Kit didn't go back on his word!"

Onward he sped, running with practiced skill, the pace of one whose goal is not far distant. The long, swinging stride is abandoned, short, quick steps taking its place. The toe of each moccasin cuts deeply into the ground, casting tiny bit of earth to the rear. It is like the dash of the race-horse—entering upon the home-stretch.

Like bloodhounds, the Plain Crees follow swiftly upon the trail, giving vent to an occasional sharp yell. There is no difficulty in following; the trail is cut plain and deep, that of one who wishes to be followed. But of this they do not think. The mad thirst for blood drives all else from their minds.

Death-Trailer darted on with unfailing speed for a full mile from the spot where he had slain the Cree brave. Then he paused abruptly upon the edge of a ravine that intersected his course. This was the goal he desired.

The ravine was about twenty feet in depth, by twice that in width. Its sides were almost perpendicular, thus forming a large natural "trough," with an almost level bottom, strongly resembling the barrancas that abound in our far western prairies, in all save one respect. The sides and bottom of this ravine were more or less thickly covered with stunted shrubbery, wreathed with vines and creepers.

Only pausing to utter a single cry, loud and distinct, that was immediately answered by the Cree yell, Death-Trailer sprung down the steep bank, safely reaching the bottom. Darting along this for a few yards, he parted a dense mass of bushes, and disappeared. The next moment his rifle-muzzl parted the leafy screen, directed toward the point he had descended.

He had not long to wait. The Cree braves had followed close upon his footsteps, and scarcely had the vines ceased to vibrate as they closed behind the Death-Trailer, when a tall savage paused upon the edge of the ravine, with a little cry of surprise.

A suspicion that all was not right seemed to strike him,

but Death-Trailer was too quick. As the brave started back, a jet of flame-tinged smoke shot out from the dark covert, and with a horrible yell the savage bounded high into the air, turning over and over until checked by the rocky bottom of the ravine.

His comrades witnessed his death with cries of rage and grief, and maddened by the sight, rushed to the edge of the avine.

Guided by the smoke-wreath and the trembling vines, they discharged their rifles with one accord.

Even amid the reverberating echoes, a deep, hollow groan assailed their ears ; the sound that a dying man might make. Triumphant yells told that this was their belief—that they felt their hated foe was now indeed their prey, and, in a body, they leaped down the steep bank.

With a shrill, vindictive laugh of joy, the Death-Trailer sprung out from his covert, a cocked revolver in either hand. An avenging spirit, he burst upon their view, for a moment paralyzing their senses.

The death-like groan had been but a simple ruse to throw them off their guard. At the moment of firing, Death-Trailer had glided swiftly to one side. Thus their bullets had spent their force against the senseless bank beyond the screen.

The scene that followed words can ill describe. The sharp, vicious reports of the two revolvers seemed blended in one lingering discharge, so rapidly were the chambers emptied.

Yells of terror, dismay, rage and death-agony were mingled with the fierce, snarling cry of the avenger. A floundering, rustling noise followed ; the scramble of swift-moving feet ; a heavy fall ; then swiftly-repeated blows.

The smoke-cloud lifted slowly. A thrilling scene was revealed.

Closely grouped lay three bodies. One doubled up with head beneath the body, and limbs distended ; the brave that had fallen from the bank above. Two others lay near, still quivering in death-thoes. A fourth leaned against a boulder, over the gray side of which flowed a black stream of blood. His head was thrown back, his features convulsed, as he

gasped for breath ; then a red stream burst from his lips, and his head drooped. He, too, was dead.

A few paces further on, lay still a fifth Cree. His lower limbs were powerless. A bullet had broken his back. Yet, with knife bared in his right hand, he was trying to drag himself along toward the antagonists who were so madly, desperately struggling in a death-grapple upon the blood-stained rocks.

The combatants were Death-Trailer and a Cree brave ; tall, sinewy and active. With rare courage, in an Indian, he had darted through the leaden hail and grappled with the avenger. Both soon fell to the ground in an embrace that could terminate only in the death of one or both the parties.

In the first shock, Duncan had received a slight wound upon his shoulder, a quick leap saving him from death. Before the blow could be repeated, he clutched the armed hand, holding it from his body despite the Indian's mad efforts to free himself.

Over and over they rolled, first one atop, then the other. Then a cry of fierce joy broke from Death-Trailer's lips. He had forced the knife from the Cree's grasp, though he failed to secure it himself. And then both his hands went upon the Indian's throat, contracting with a vise-like grip.

Gradually the savage failed. The iron muscles of the old man prevailed. Wrenching his body free, Old Kit whirled the savage over upon his back, then rose to his knees. With one hand still buried in the swollen throat, Duncan whipped forth his knife, and drove it half-way to the hilt in the red-man's skull.

A little cry of triumph broke from Death-Trailer's lips, as he flung back his head, at the successful ending of his desperate struggle for life. At the same moment a motion seemed to flash before his eyes ; a hot pain shot through his throat.

The crippled Cree, on seeing the victory rest with the scourge of his tribe, summoned up all his strength and cast his knife at Death-Trailer. Only for the involuntary motion of the old man the knife would have pierced his neck. As it was, the razor-like edge just cut the skin along his throat, then the knife clattered against the rocks beyond.

Duncan saw at a glance that the savage was helpless, because entirely unarmed, and he sunk back, panting, breathless, a fierce glow of triumph in his eyes.

As the Cree saw his effort fail, he steadied his body upon his hands, calmly eying his enemy, uttering a strange, peculiar sound. Thrilling, yet low and quavering sounded the words; the Cree was singing his death-song.

Death-Trailer reached out and picked up one of the revolvers he had dropped when assailed by the last Cree, glancing at the cylinder. There yet remained one charge. Coolly cocking the weapon, he glanced toward the Cree, saying, in the dialect:

"You are a brave. Death-Trailer will wait until your song has reached the ears of Wahcatunca."

Slowly the death-chant died away. The Cree submissively bowed his head as the revolver was leveled. At the report he fell forward; one convulsive quiver—no more.

Old Kit glanced around over the bloody scene, with an exultant fire in his eyes. It was no slight victory. But of that he did not think. He only saw the face of his friend smiling approval at his bloody work.

Yet the victory was easily accounted for. The Crees had vainly emptied their rifles at the inanimate bank. Pistols they had none. Before they recovered from the surprise of the supposed dead man's appearance, three of their number had fallen. Another sunk at his first leap—then the fifth, leaving only one to gain striking distance with knife.

Death-Trailer rapidly reloaded his weapons, and then bent over the dead Crees, in succession. When he arose, a ghastly pouch hung at his belt. The bare skulls of the slain shone horribly in the bright moonlight.

Then he turned and scrambled up the bank. A quick glance showed him the coast clear. Emerging from the ravine, he took up his own trail, following it back to the belt of open ground. Until that was gained, he used considerable caution, as though half-expecting to meet with other foes, but when he added the seventh trophy to his belt, Duncan felt assured that all who had earnestly pursued him had fallen. For a brief period he cogitated, then decided:

"I'll try it; the ford 'll tell the tale. But I sadly mis-doubt that the poor gal is lost for good. *Durn* them chuckle-headed Kanucks, anyhow!"

Turning away from the mutilated corpse, Death-Trailei abandoned the back trail, striking in a more direct course for the Saskatchewan. Though this would almost double the journey in length, prudence dictated the course, and for once Death-Trailei was not desirous of meeting the Crees. Not that his vengeance was sated with the blood he had already shed; far from it. While life continued, that could not be. But now his thoughts were busy with the fair maiden whom he had dared so much to preserve from the foul plot against her liberty and honor. He deemed it a duty to ascertain the truth, though his fears were strong that all was in vain.

A stern, gloomy expression upon his face, Death-Trailei strode through the scattering forest, toward the Saskatchewan. He had reached a more dense portion, when he suddenly paused and hearkened. Then he crouched down beneath a thick bush, and prepared his weapons.

A crackling sound came to his ear, as if made by somebody forcing a reckless passage through the undergrowth, in a course that must bring them near his position. But as he attentively listened, Kit heard the thud of a horse's hoofs.

"The critter is astray, or else the one 'at's ridin' it is a pesky greenhorn," he continued; then his face brightened as he added: "Thunder! s'posin' it's the gal!"

A moment later this hope was dispelled. A riderless horse pressed through the bushes. Its bridle was broken. A dark blotch disfigured the saddle. This much Kit saw as the beast, fresh startled, dashed past him.

"That settles it! Grouche La Pard rid that critter. The blood tells the tale!" gloomily uttered Old Kit, rising erect.

CHAPTER V.

THE YOUNG FUR-TRADER.

WITH a mental prayer that she might be saved, the young man who had so boldly risked his life to rescue Lucille Ampere, turned and dashed rapidly away from her hiding-place. For a short distance he continued his leaping from rock to rock, in order to break the trail, then ran on at top-speed, bringing all his powers into play.

In following the course he had, the young man had two objects in view ; to throw the savages off the scent as regarded Lucille, and to gain time for himself. For the first reason he had carried the maiden to her covert, using the numerous stones that so thickly covered the ground, knowing that they would retain no impress of his moccasined feet. The rapid run through the bushes and undergrowth had brushed their garments nearly free from the river water, and the dry ground quickly absorbed the occasional drops that fell, so that this would no longer aid the pursuers.

In the evident expectation of speedily running the fugitives down, the Crees were dashing on at full speed, paying little attention to the trail. It was not likely they would notice the sudden breaking of it, or suspect the *ruse* put upon them. Sooner or later they would miss the fugitives, and then would be forced to hunt for the trail. When this was found, they would see that the white man was alone. But a wide field was spread around, any portion of which might contain the hiding-place of the maiden. To search it thoroughly would require time, and before Lucille should be discovered, he hoped to return with assistance.

It seemed an unlikely portion of the earth in which to expect aid, but the young man had no doubt but that he would succeed. If all had gone well, his comrades were even then awaiting his arrival. To explain :

Ethan Dunbar was a young man of Scotch descent, apparently seven or eight and twenty years of age, tall, and of

unusually athletic build, with the light hair and florid complexion that usually mark the children of Caledonia. His father and uncles were extensively engaged in the fur trade, with general head-quarters at Montreal, and agencies at St. Paul, Detroit, and Omaha. After serving as "clerk" until he had thoroughly mastered the mysteries of the trade, young Ethan was made "captain," and given charge of twenty stout men. This year, his route was down the Saskatchewan and its tributaries, his object being to establish permanent connection with the different tribes, by which the company were to have all their furs. This much to account for his presence in that region.

Early that morning Dunbar had left his men at the camp, while he took the small canoe and ran down the stream to Saskatchewan, to learn the truth of the report a Wood Cree gave, of a large village of Indians being just settled there, as though intending to remain some length of time. He had paddled down South Fork for several miles, and found the Indians to be of the Knistenaux tribe. They, as well as the Cree Indians, professed peace. He found them in possession of a large number of furs, eager to dispose of them. Promising to return soon, with many fine goods, the young trader took his leave, in high spirits, at the prospect of a remunerative barter.

He had just entered the mouth of the little creek, when he heard the sound of rifle-shots, and wild yells from above. Giving way to a natural curiosity, he paddled toward the spot, keeping well under cover, favored in this by the bushes that overhung the northern water-edge.

The shots were those fired by and at Death-Trailer, and the young fur-trader came in view of the ford just as the main portion of the Indians were recalled from the chase by their renegade leader. It needed but one glance to tell Ethan Dunbar that mischief was afoot, since the red-skins were in all the glory of war-paint and feathers. But what had caused the firing? This the young man resolved to discover, if possible.

From his covert he could see that the savages were hovering about the water-edge upon the northern side. Still he did not suspect the truth, but believed they were busy with

the victim or victims of the volley he had heard. Now that he had come so far, he resolved to learn all, even though by so doing he should incur some risk.

Tying the canoe fast, Dunbar glided slowly and cautiously along the shore, keeping well covered by the grass and undergrowth. It was a difficult task, and one that required time. In order to take advantage of the best cover, he was forced to lose sight of the river. And by that fact, he was unable to frustrate the tragedy that followed. Had he seen Andre Genlis entering the river, he would have called out to warn him of the ambush, trusting in his skill with the paddle to carry him out of the danger such a course would precipitate.

His scouting was suddenly interrupted by the loud voice of Andre Genlis, bidding the other voyageurs in charge of Lucille Ampere cross over. Then came the reply, in feminine tones.

Greatly excited, Dunbar turned and retraced his steps, almost forgetting the close proximity of the Indians, in his anxiety to avert the impending tragedy. But he was too late.

Scarcely had he gained a view of the river, when the death-dealing volley rung out. With feelings that words can not describe, the young fur-trader witnessed the terrible scene. He saw the mad struggling of the maiden's wounded horse, and then saw it plunge into the river below the ford. Rushing to his canoe, he at once pushed out to the rescue, utterly regardless of the peril he himself was incurring.

The result of his bold venture is clearly before the reader.

It was upon his men that Ethan Dunbar depended for assistance, and toward the rendezvous his steps were now directed. Fleet of foot, and sound in wind, the young trader felt little fear for the result of the race, barring accident. He had more than once tested the prowess of the Plain Cree, in friendly contest, during his trading with them, and though their best braves were produced, the trader had ever vanquished them in point of fleetness.

A ter breaking his trail as described, Dunbar crouched low beneath the cover, keeping carefully concealed from any who might be upon his tracks. In this manner he crossed the intervals of rock-strewn ground, and reached the forest beyond.

Here such precautions were rendered unnecessary by the thickly growing trees.

Satisfied that before the Plain Crees could recover his trail a sufficient distance would be gained, Dunbar settled down into a long, sweeping stride, that, while covering much ground in a short time, does not greatly fatigue the runner, nor seriously impair his wind. Thus the trader settled down to a ten-mile race.

He smiled grimly as the confused yelling met his ears. He knew that the Crees had just missed the trail, which was now the only thing they could be guided by. Still, though feeling assured that some minutes must elapse before they could regain it, Dunbar did not relax his efforts in the least. He knew that the maiden whom he had so strangely met for the first time was still in imminent peril. At any moment an accident might result in her discovery.

For over an hour he maintained his stride, pausing only once for a moment at a small stream to quench his thirst and cool his burning brow. Then on again, until, with a sigh of relief, he caught sight of a tiny thread of smoke curling up above the treetops, marking the camp of his men.

A single whistle gave the alarm, and with ready weapons the party sallied out to meet him. A few words satisfied them that no immediate danger was to be apprehended, and together they returned to the camp. Throwing himself upon the ground, Dunbar gave himself up to the repose he so much needed.

With curiosity greatly excited by the strange return of their captain, the men gathered around, waiting in silence for an explanation. Twenty in number, the men formed a body that the young trader might well be proud of commanding; men "fit to do battle for a crown," in their own peculiar field.

The majority were Canadians, one might almost say born *voyageurs* or wood-rangers. A few were Scotchmen, with one or two genuine citizens of Uncle Sam. All were thoroughly armed, though, unless under extraordinary circumstances, these were seldom called into use against the red-skins, of later years.

"Well, my men, you see I come home in a different man-

ner from what I expected," began Dunbar, having regained his breath. "I want my other rifle and a brace of dry pistols, then I'm going back. Such of you as choose to volunteer may go with me."

There was but one reply; Dunbar smiled grimly. He had counted upon as much. The men were true as steel, and thoroughly devoted to him.

He briefly detailed the events of that day, adding:

"The lady, I think, is the daughter of old Francois Ampere, at the Post. I heard he was expecting her. If so, and we save her, besides acting as men should, it will work to the company's hands, too. Old Francois will give us the preference, then, and he has a noble lot of furs."

But little time was cut to waste. In less than a quarter of an hour from his arrival in camp, all but three of the trappers, who were left in charge of the effects, took up the back trail. Fresh-armed, Dunbar urged forward his men, feeling anxious regarding the maiden he had hidden away. With several men thrown out in advance to guard against a surprise, in case the Plain Crees were still following his trail, the party proceeded at a rapid, loping trot.

Sandy McGregor, a wiry Scotchman, was the scout that took up the trail. A comrade glided along upon either hand a score yards distant. In this manner over one-third the distance had been traversed without event worthy of note.

Then Sandy swiftly raised his rifle, uttering a sharp whistle as he did so. A huge Cree warrior had caught his eye, gliding along the trader's trail. At the whistle, he raised his eyes. But he realized his danger too late to avoid it.

Scarcely had he made out the tall figure of the scout, when McGregor's rifle spoke. Bounding high into the air, uttering the never-failing death-yell, the Cree fell, dead.

Like an echo, another rifle spoke, from Sandy's right. Again the horrible shriek told that a savage heart had been forever stilled. Accompanying this came several different cries, plainly evincing the presence of other foes.

The main body of the trappers rushed forward to support their trail-hunters, but the anticipated attack was not made. All was still beyond where the fallen Cree lay.

Leaping swiftly from tree to tree, from bush to bush, the

trappers advanced in skirmishing line ; but no living foe confronted them. And upon the moist ground they read the truth.

There had been only six in the party of trail-hunters. On the death of two of their number, the others had turned and fled. This their tracks plainly proved.

Chafing at the delay, though it had been unavoidable, Dunbar urged on his men. The fleeing savages had soon diverged from the back trail, but the trappers did not pursue them. A more important object led them straight on.

As they neared the rock-mound the young trader's fears increased. Beyond a doubt the savages had discovered that he had fled alone after passing the rock-strewn tract, else the entire party would have been sent in pursuit, instead of only six. He feared that the remainder had been successful in their search for the concealed maiden.

Reaching the rocky tract, Dunbar directed his men to spread out, advancing with care and caution. The ground was favorable for an ambush, and this would assuredly be tried had the Crees discovered their enemies' approach. And where the parties were so nearly equal in numbers, the first volley would probably decide the victory in their favor.

But nothing was seen of the Crees, and then Dunbar, under care of his men's rifles, advanced alone to the spot where he had left the maiden. Pausing beside the bushes, he called aloud :

"Lady, don't be alarmed. We are friends, come to take you to your father. You remember my voice—I left you here to go for assistance."

There came no reply. The trader's heart beat painfully as he waited. Once more he called ; still silence answered.

Then he leaned forward and parted the bushes. All was still. His eyes distinguished nothing but dark leaves and gray rock. The niche was empty ! Lucille was gone !

At this moment the sharp report of a rifle broke the air. Quickly turning, Dunbar beheld a tall form rise up, with hands clasped to its blood-stained brow, then fall heavily forward. It was the form of Sandy McGregor. A bullet had pierced his brain.

Murder and clear, vindictive and menacing, rose a single yell

—the scalp-cry of the Plain Crees. The vibrating sound was caught up by other throats, and echoed back from several different points, in close proximity to the voyageurs. And as if in answer, came a long, wild series of yells from beyond the rock-mound.

The traders were surrounded. The four Cree braves who had been trailing Dunbar, on finding themselves not pursued, had turned and followed the party. Knowing that their comrades were not far distant, by the agreement which had been made when the party divided, the braves had crept up until one of them caught sight of the unfortunate scout. A well-aimed bullet had too surely avenged the huge trail-hunter.

Keeping well covered, Dunbar glided back and rejoined his men. They were in a good position for withstanding an open assault, well screened by rocks and bushes. Yet, ignorant of the strength of the enemy, they were naturally anxious. Had they known the truth, one bold charge would have cleared the way to the friendly woods; as it was they could only wait with what patience they might summon.

A spiteful report rung out, and Dunbar started back as several sharp splinters from the rock before him flew up into his face. A bullet had passed close by his head, striking the boulder, with the effect noted.

Glancing quickly around, he saw a faint curl of smoke slowly lifting above the rock-mound. The Cree braves had possessed themselves of that vantage-point.

The traders guarded themselves against this peril as quickly as possible, but it forced them to lie close behind their coverts. Thus surrounded, they began to grow uneasy.

Several more shots were fired from the mound-top, but the traders were untouched. Neither could they catch a glimpse of the marksmen, try as they might. Whenever one fired at the smoke-puff, a yell of derision from savage throats told how futile was the attempt.

But then, as another missile came from the summit, toward which all eyes were instinctively turned, a dusky figure was seen to leap high above the rocks, with convulsed limbs, and then fall headlong across the boulder, a horrible, blood-curdling yell telling the tale. The savage marksman was dead; but whose hand had discharged the fatal shot?

The traders interchanged glances of wondering surprise. None of their party had fired. Could it be that one of the Crees had slain his comrade through surprise or by accident? That did not seem likely, yet what other solution could they arrive at?

Their surprise caused some of the traders to forget their usual caution, and well-nigh cost them a life. A shot came from the level ground, near the point from whence had come McGregor's death. A voyageur uttered a little cry, clapping a hand to his neck. A bullet had barely broke the skin, then hurtled harmlessly on.

Two of the voyageurs had marked the smoke-curl, and now, without Dunbar's knowledge, proceeded to make use of the discovery. Gradually diverging to either side, they crawled on, with rifles in readiness for instant use.

So intent were they upon this, each eager to obtain the first shot, that their recklessness became marked. A savage, probably with a similar design against the pale-faces, was crawling along in a parallel course, when he heard the rustling of their passage. Thus guided, he soon caught sight of the nearest pale-face, and raised his rifle. The voyageur little suspected his peril, and his fate seemed sealed, as the Cree brave glanced along the dark, leveled tube.

But once more the unknown marksman discharged his piece with unerring aim. The Cree fell forward, writhing in death agony, his rifle discharging harmlessly as it struck the ground.

A yell of anger came from the Crees upon the mound, and the fur-traders caught momentary glimpses of their dusky figures as they flitted to and fro among the bowlders and bushes. But before the quickest eye and hand could sight them with a rifle, the phantom-like figures vanished again.

Dunbar grew impatient and resolved upon determined action. The sun was growing low, and the affair must be determined before nightfall.

"Boys," he uttered, in a clear tone. "I believe those devils mean to charge us. Let's meet them half-way. Spread out so as to cover both sides of the mound. Half a dozen of you stay here to pick off any who come from the ground back of us. There can't be many. You that I mention, stay here," and Ethan called off a number of names.

"Look out thar, strangers, the varmints is a-comin'!"

The voice rung out clear and distinct, and the traders were startled, but the warning was one they could not neglect. The crisis was at hand. Brief glimpses could be caught of the dusky foe as they darted from one cover to another, coming from round both sides of the mound. In hunter parlance, this is a charge; the most deadly of all charges.

"Hi—yi!" yelled the voice, "gi' them ge-mineezers!" and the foremost Cree went down in death before his rifle.

CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBLE PERIL.

THIS sight was enough to convince Old Kit that his worst forebodings were only too true. The stray horse so recently ridden by Grouche La Pard, the voyageur, the broken reins and blood-stained saddle, all plainly betokened a tragedy. Duncan now felt assured that the ambush had been sprung, with fatal success.

"Well, I don't know as thar's much use, but I'm goin' to take a look at the ground, anyhow. 'Tain't likely the varmints hev rubbed the gal out, too. And ef she's livin', that or'nary white Injun shain't hev it all his own way, ef I hev to drop him in the middle of his gang."

As these thoughts found broken utterance, the old man arose from his covert, and resumed his course toward the river. There was an earnestness in his manner that spoke plainer than words. His mind was evidently made up, and a plan of procedure mapped out that little short of death could shake.

Crawling down the river-bank, Old Kit peered cautiously through the bushes; but nothing suspicious met his eyes. The broad river rolled on, swiftly, silently. The icy-cold waters seemed an impassable barrier to one without a canoe, yet Old Kit intended crossing.

"It's safe here as any place, I reckon anyway, I'll resk it. That side is the one I must work ou."

While uttering these words, Old Kit glided noiselessly up the river-bank, casting his eyes around as though searching for something. Before long, a little satisfied grunt announced his success. Before him lay a fragment of dead-wood, light and buoyant. A slight effort sufficed to roll this into the water, and then Duncan secured upon its top, safe from water his weapons and outer clothing.

As though fully assured that perfect safety attended his venture, the old man boldly pushed out into the swift stream, propelling the rude float before him. Duncan swam low down in the water, as though to lessen the target he would present to any one observing his venture. Knowing that enemies were afoot, the action was a bold, almost foolhardy one, but Old Kit cared little for personal danger.

Fortune seemed to favor him in this, for he gained the shore unmolested, and wringing the icy-cold water from his garments, Death-Trailer was soon in readiness for further work. Looking carefully to his weapons, he turned his face down the river toward the ford. From what he could learn there, his future actions must be regulated.

An observer could not but have admired the skill and celerity with which the old scout threaded the forest, his moccasined feet scarce rustling a fallen leaf, his body parting the laced bushes without a crackling sound. More like the noiseless passage of some phantom he glided along; so perfect was the skill he displayed.

Nearing the ford, Duncan slackened his pace, feeling well his way before proceeding. This kind of work required time, and the sun was past the meridian when he became fully satisfied that the savages no longer occupied the place he had discovered them lying in ambush the preceding day.

But as he approached the spot, he abruptly paused, drawing a revolver. A faint noise assailed his ears. A few moments later it was resumed, this time more distinctly. It sounded like the moans of a human being who had suffered terrible agony until about at his last gasp.

Cautiously Death-Trailer advanced, and then, noiselessly parting a leafy bush, he peered out upon a tiny glade. And from one side of this proceeded the moaning sound.

A human figure lay at full length upon the torn and

trampled grass ; the dress was made almost entirely of tanned skins, now disarranged and blood-stained. The skull showed a ghastly, blood-curdling sight. The scalp had been torn from the man's head.

Duncan believed that he recognized the mutilated form, but the face was turned from him, and he was too old a scout to jump at conclusions. Cautiously he glided around until the features were visible. Even through the half-dried mass of blood that covered the distorted lineaments, he could not be mistaken. It was bold but rash Andre Genlis that lay before him.

Old Kit arose and entered the little glade, his face cold and stern. The pity that he might once have felt at such a sight, was forgotten in the remembrance of the voyageur's insulting words and suspicions. And then too, his rashness had brought this upon himself, if not upon one far more worthy of pity ; Lucille Ampere.

The voyageur moved faintly as the old man passed before him, but there was no recognition in the bloodshot eyes that were feebly uplifted. A hollow, rattling sound parted his lips. Bending, Duncan managed to catch the word *water*.

" You treated me like a dog, Kanuck, but I won't forget that we're both white men. Water you shell hav in plenty."

A moment later Duncan raised the head of the dying man, and held the battered skin hat to his lips. Genlis swallowed the cool soothing liquid greedily, until the hat was drained ; then he sunk back once more, with a sigh of relief. His eyes fixed upon the old man, and gradually a ray of intelligence came into them. He recognized the hunter. The draught of water had wonderfully revived him, and—though faintly—he contrived to utter :

" The lady—Miss Lucille—where is she ?"

" That's what I hoped you 'd be able to tell me, Kanuck. I hain't set eyes on her sence you driv' me away, this morning."

" I was a fool—a blind, blind fool ! But I'm punished—for I'm dying. But my lady—only for her, I wouldn't care. If I could only see her once more—just to ask her forgiveness. But she's gone—it's too late !" groaned the voyageur.

" Mebbe she escaped ?" suggested Duncan, though hopefully,

"No—that couldn't be. They are all dead—or captives."

"You must 'a' bin blind, to run into the ambush, a'ter bein' warned. Even ef you did doubt my truth, one would 'a' thought you'd 'a' made sure the ford was clear afore lettin' her cross."

"I did try. I came over here first. As I reached this spot, I was caught from behind, and a blanket thrown over my head. I cried out, but could not make myself heard. Then the devils bound and gagged me. One of them took my hat and waved it above the bushes, bidding my friends to cross over without fear. Then they stood me up so I could be seen from the river, but they held me fast, hand and foot, threatened me with death if I attempted to give the alarm. For that I didn't care, and contrived to spit the gag from my jaws. I called out and warned them, but it was too late. A red-skin drove his knife into my breast, and I fell, with their rifle-shots ringing in my ears. Then I knew no more until I saw you here, standing before me."

This explanation was broken and disconnected, but the substance was the same as that recorded. Old Kit listened intently, his heart warming toward the faithful though rash friend.

"You didn't know any of the gang, then?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes—thanks! I had forgotten—my brain burns so that I can not think. Promise me that you will avenge her—that you will hunt the renegade down like a dog!" exclaimed the voyageur, in a strained, deadly voice.

"I will—ef he hes done any thin' to harm the pritty gal. Thar's my hand on it, Kanuck," earnestly replied Kit.

"They know him well at the fort. You can learn all about him there. He is called Jean Pierrot—do not forget: JEAN PIERROT."

"It's marked down. I'll kill him ef I kin," quietly.

"And—tell him—Francois Ampere—that I— Ah!"

With a terrible groan of agony, the head of the voyageur fell back. He was dead.

"Kanuck, I ax your pardin," muttered Old Kit, reverently bowing his head. "You was a white man, plum through; but ye'd 'a' showed more sense hed ye taken my advice."

After a moment's thought, Duncan lifted the corse and bore it to the river's side. Securing a heavy rock to the body, he pushed them over the rock ledge. The ill-fated voyageur sunk to the bottom. The scavengers of the air and earth should be disappointed of their prey.

It seemed as though, with the sinking of the body, all thoughts connected with the dead voyageur had disappeared as well, for the next moment Old Kit deliberately set to work. It was no trifling task, and this fact Duncan soon realized.

Closely examining the ground adjacent to the ford, he found out, first, that no horses had crossed over that day. Next, he noticed the deeply imprinted footprints of the savages along the shore below the ford, where they had recklessly tore through vines and stunted bushes, as though in great haste. These rocks came to an abrupt ending a mile further down, by taking to the water.

"Thar it is, plain as mud!" he uttered, turning to retrace his steps to the ford. "They wasn't all killed at the crossin'. One or more o' them tuck to the water—alive, too. Ef only a'ter a skelp, the varmints wouldn't 'a' hed to run so fur an' fast. The place to pick up the trail—ef thar *is* any sech—is on t'other side. Resk or no resk, I'm goin' over. I'll find out the fate o' pritty, if I die for't!"

Holding his weapons in readiness for instant use, Old Kit crossed at the ford, without interruption. Nor did any thing suspicious meet his eye or ear as he pressed on down the bank.

Again he abruptly paused, stooping low over the ground. The soil was here cut and torn by the swift passage of a goodly number of feet. He knew that they had been in hot pursuit, though nothing save the imprints of Cree moccasins met his gaze, keen though it was. Those of the fugitives had been covered and obliterated.

Utterly regardless of the danger he might himself be incurring, Death-Trailer struck out along this broad track, resolved to follow it until he could clearly read the enigma. But his patience was not very hardly tasked.

Half a mile further on, he saw where two sets of tracks gradually diverged from those of the Cree pursuers. Kneel-

ing, he jealously scrutinized the footprints. At first he feared to believe his eyes, but then a glad cry broke from his lips :

" Glory to God ! it's the track of the gal ! Her foot ain't much bigger'n a grasshopper's—but I know it. She's passed by here, not two hours gone by. But who was 'long 'th her, an' whar is they now ?" he added, a little dubiously.

Duncan arose and glanced keenly around. His view was limited by the stunted forest and the boulders that, a little further on, lay thickly scattered over the ground. He listened. All was still.

" I'll follow the trail—it's the surest way, though awful slow," the old scout added, and thus, with eyes as sharp and true as the nose of a hound, he pressed on, lifting the obscure trail with a celerity really marvelous.

Slower and slower grew his progress, as the nature of the ground became more and more flinty, until, with a muttered curse, he paused short. The trail was lost ; the most persistent search failed to discover any sign or trace of the course taken by the fugitives.

" Thar's the mound—mebbe I kin see somethin' from the top o' it. Anyhow, thar's no use in wastin' more time at this work. A nigger-huntin' bloodhound couldn't more'n lift the trail, the way it is now," disgustedly cried Duncan.

Turning toward the queer-shaped mound of rocks, he strode rapidly on, his disappointment making him reckless. At that moment he would gladly have hailed the sight of enemies approaching, without much care for odds, however great.

He paused twice, before reaching the rock-mound, each time bending over a footprint. His brow gradually grew brighter, as though pleased at some thought. Yet both tracks were those of Indians ; very different from the slender tracks he had been so recently following.

" Whoever was with the gal, hes manidged to throw dust in the varmints' eyes, anyhow. Here they've bin doublin' back an' forth, huntin' fer the lost trail. Mebbe it's all right a'ter all," Old Kit observed, once more advancing.

He had nearly reached the hill-foot when he paused, almost throwing himself down as he twisted his descending foot

aside to avoid marring a faint trace upon the ground beside a small rock. Intently studying this for a minute, he was startled by a noise beneath the bush his hand had grasped. As he glanced up, a huge, hideous rattlesnake slowly crawled away from its disturbed rest, gliding into a dense mass of shrubbery a few paces beyond.

At any other time Kit would have slain the reptile, as he had an unusually strong hatred for snakes, but the discovery he had just made drove all such thoughts from his mind. The footprint he had so narrowly escaped obliterating was that of the man who was aiding Lucille in her flight. In leaping from rock to rock, he had alighted upon a slanting portion, thus leaving the print. Duncan knew there could be no mistake. He had marked the formation of the foot too well for that.

With a start, he sprung erect. A peculiar sound filled his ears. But one cause could have produced that noise; the venomous *skir-r* of the rattlesnake when preparing to strike.

He glanced swiftly around, but could see nothing of the reptile, though the rattle still sounded in his ears. Then another sound mingled with the shrill vibration. Old Kit turned ghastly pale. It resembled the last moan of a dying person.

For a moment the hunter was held motionless by a feeling of superstition. But only for an instant. Then he glided forward, and parted the bushes beneath which he had seen the snake disappear. Louder and angrier rung the shrill rattle.

A peculiar scene met Duncan's eye. A dark figure was crouching upon the ground, against the rock. Close besid the dark drapery, that told Kit the figure was that of a woman, lay coiled the venomous serpent, its head flung back, as though about to launch its slimy length upon the helpless being.

The serpent, disturbed by the rustling bushes, partly uncoiled and turned its head toward the opening. Only for a moment. Then once more the death-dealing fangs threatened the woman.

Old Kit jerked out his revolver, and leveled it through the

opening. It was a risky shot that he was forced to make. In the gloom the form of the woman could be but ill defined. The bullet might be fatal to her as well as the reptile. Yet he had no other choice.

His aim was quick as thought, but certain as death. At the report, the snake fell in a writhing heap, its rattle sounding its death-note in a long, shrill *skir-r*.

Leaning forward, Duncan clutched the loathsome thing and flung it far away over the rocks. Then he knelt beside the still, motionless form. A terrible fear filled his heart. He believed that his shot had been fatal to her as well. That was a moment of exquisite agony, for he recognized Lucille Ampere, the woman he had wished so much to save from the ambush.

He bore her form out into the fresh air, handling her with an almost reverential care, that seemed doubly strange in one whose hands were so deeply stained with blood. Then a cry of joy broke from his lips as her eyes opened, and she faintly pronounced his name.

"Yes, it's me, lady. But I'm 'feard you're hurt—did the bullet hurt you?" he asked, eagerly.

"No—I think not. But did—the snake—"

"He didn't bite ye, thank the good Lord fer that! But thar! I was durned fool to forgit so long. Wait here, while I go up the rock a bit to see ef any o' the varmints heard my firin'."

The old hunter rapidly scaled the mount, though keeping well concealed. For a moment he glanced keenly around upon the prospect. Then a bitter curse came from his throat. A mile away, he could distinguish the rapidly nearing forms of nearly a score footmen. That they were Indians, he did not for a moment doubt; and being such, were enemies, probably those who had ambushed the ford, who had proceeded thus far in their wild search for the fugitives, when the pistol-shot recalled them. So Old Kit reasoned.

"We must make tracks fer it, lady," he said, as he regained Lucille's side. "They'd soon rout us out o' this. Lucky wehev some time to break our trail. Our show ain't so bad as it mought be, afer all. You feel strong enough to try?"

"Yes—any thing to escape falling into their power," she replied, resolutely.

"You must let me kerry you fer a bit, then. You ain't used to sech work, an' then you'll need all your stren'th afore the eend," he cried, apologetically, as he lifted Lucille in his wiry arms.

Pursuing the same tactics that Ethan Dunbar had earlier in the day, Old Kit leaped lightly from rock to rock, leaving no trace behind him to guide the eyes of the Crees. Then, panting, he set Lucille down beyond the rocky tract.

It may appear strange that he had not made direct for the ford, but that action he knew would have been fatal. The Crees would have discovered the fleeing forms before half the distance was covered, and then it would only have been a matter of time, since Lucille was ill fitted for a race with them.

Knowing this Old Kit resolved to make a detour through the woods, breaking and blinding his trail until the Crees were thrown off the scent. Then, since they would doubtless guard the ford, he would strike further down the river, and cross at the point he had attempted to reach with the voyageurs.

Leading Lucille, he pressed on at a steady pace, feeling confident that some time must elapse ere the savages could strike the trail. A mile beyond the rocky tract he paused abruptly, crouching down beneath a dense shrub. The faint sound of footsteps met his ear. Only for a moment; then all was still.

Puzzled, fearing to move, Old Kit waited, with ready weapon. A few moments later he heard other footfalls, more distinctly. And then from his covert he glared out upon the figures of four Plain Crees, as they glided stealthily past. It was a violent struggle with the deadly hatred that filled the avenger's breast at the sight of the savages whose kindred had dealt him such a heavy blow; but Duncan choked down the mad desire, as he thought of the helpless maiden whose safety seemed to depend solely upon his skill and prudence.

One circumstance puzzled the scout. The Crees appeared to be dogging some hated, yet feared foe. They skulked along as though half-expecting to be turned upon and rent

to pieces. What did it mean? Surely, the footfalls that had gone before were made by their own people.

"I must find out what it all means, anyhow. Lady, you ain't skeered to stay alone here for a bit? I jest want to take a look at the trail o' them what fust passed by."

"If you think it is for the best, do so. But, sir, remember that you are my only earthly hope now," earnestly replied she.

"An if I fail you, may the good Lord kill me, fer I wouldn't be fit to live. No, my child, I will put you safe in your father's arms, or die a-tryin' of it. But thar—keep close-kivered an' don't move a peg ontel I come back."

A minute later Old Kit bent over a goodly-sized trail. A short scrutiny convinced him that it had been made by white men. But who? that puzzled him. In the haste of their flight, Lucille had not time to tell him of Dunbar's promise to return with assistance. But now she did so, when he told her of his discovery.

"Then it's them—ge-long! we'll whip the imps yit! But they're runnin' into danger. I'll go an'—"

At that moment the shot was fired that killed Sandy McGregor.

CHAPTER VII.

A TROUBLED TRAIL.

OLD KIT glanced wistfully at Lucille.

"Don't let thoughts of me interfere with your duty," the maiden hastened to say, answering his unspoken wish. "I am willing to trust all to you, sir.

"Twould be foolish to lose such a chainte as this. Then *you* must be in no danger. The varmints 'll be too busy to think o' huntin' fer lost gold," chuckled Old Kit, joyous at the thought of once more dealing a blow at his hated enemies.

A few moments sufficed to place Lucille in a secure covert. Then Death-Trailer glided toward the rocky tract. As the reader knows, he arrived most opportunely, his being the true

aim that killed the Cree marksman on the rock-mound, as well as the Indian aiming at one of the scouting traders, as already narrated. Then, uttering his wild war-cry, he cheered on the fur-traders.

A yell of dismay told that he was recognized by the Plain Crees, and their charge was abruptly checked. His many almost miraculous escapes from death at their hands, had almost forced them to believe Death-Trailer a demon—one whom mortal man could not slay. And now, backed as he was by a force fully equal their own in numbers, little wonder that the Indians faltered. The hunter saw this, and divined the truth.

"Now charge the cusses, lads, an' we've got 'em!" he yelled, setting the example.

The fur-traders promptly obeyed, though he was a stranger to them. For a few minutes the rifles of the opposing party spoke rapidly, though, owing to the skill displayed by the charging force in keeping well covered, with slight effect.

Death-Trailer's rifle was heard the most frequently, and never did it speak without being answered by the last yell of a Cree. And with each shriek Old Kit thought of Yankee Sam. Right bitterly was he keeping his registered vow of vengeance.

Sullenly the Plain Crees gave way, yet threatening to turn and rend their pursuers with every backward step. Old Kit, still thinking of Lucille, saw that there was danger in pressing them too far, and passed the word for the charge to cease. Under perfect discipline, when Dunbar repeated the word, the voyageurs immediately obeyed. The Plain Crees soon vanished from view, evidently willing the struggle should cease that.

"We owe you our thanks, stranger," began Dunbar, approaching Old Kit, who impatiently interposed :

"Let up on that trail, young man. What I did was on my own hook. But say—ain't you the feller that *lost somethin'* in these parts, not long sence?" he added, significantly.

"I left a young lady here, while I went for help—but the Indians must have capured her," returned Dunbar.

"Not much—she's out yender, waitin' to thank you for what ye did. An' that's my hand, young man. I'm proud

to cross palms w' ya. 'Tain't many as would acted like you did," earnestly cried the old man.

Dunbar appeared abashed at this unexpected warmth, and the two shook hands cordially. Then Kit led the way to where Lucille was concealed. Quietly, yet earnestly, she thanked the young trader for his efforts in her behalf, who modestly replied.

"Captain, the red-skins is strikin' out fer the ford," reported a voyageur, coming up at this juncture.

"The varmints hain't got enough yit, it seems," dryly observed Old Kit. "They mean to give us more trouble, ef they kin. But I reckon we kin bamboozle 'em, a'ter all."

"They can keep us from crossing with the lady."

"At this point—yes. But we won't try that. You see it's most dark now. Ontel then we'll play the varmints, so they'll think we mean to force our way over. Then we'll give 'em the slip. I know a place we kin git across, with the lady, an' then the trail leads straight to the fort," returned Kit.

Death-Trailer's plan was promptly put into execution. He gave Dunbar explicit directions, and then dispatched him with half a dozen picked men, in charge of Lucille. They were to press steadily on until the lower crossing was gained, then wait for the main body to come up, unless overtaken before. Until nightfall, Duncan was to maneuver around the ford, to deceive the Crees and keep them there under a belief that they meant to force a passage.

This was comparatively easy work. Though nothing could be seen of the Indians, Old Kit felt perfectly sure that they were lying in ambush, upon the further shore. If he had doubted this, the actions of the birds would have satisfied him. They flitted agitatedly to and fro, chattering loudly and angrily. From their startled flight, he could trace the course of the savage scouts as they prowled along the bank upon either side of the ford, to guard against any attempt at a surprise. And he knew that their own position was equally clearly pointed out to the Crees.

When night had fairly settled over the earth, Old Kit gave the signal and silently crept away from the river. Dunbar and his party had had full two hours the start, and barring

accident, must nearly have gained the lower ford. Believing all the renegade's party stationed at the point just left, Old Kit felt little anxiety as to the result of his plan. Long before their trail could be struck, the maiden would be placed in the arms of her father.

As rapidly as the rough nature of the ground would admit, Death-Trailer led the way, followed by the voyageurs. An hour later, he neared the lower ford.

As yet, nothing had been seen or heard of the escort, but this did not alarm them. Still, all felt a feeling of deep relief as Old Kit's signal was answered by the young trader. A minute later the party was reunited.

This long pause had considerably rested Lucille, and she eagerly consented to the journey being renewed. A rude litter was hastily constructed, and, borne upon the shoulders of four tall voyageurs, the maiden was safely conveyed across the stream. Of much the same nature as the upper one, this ford was considerably deeper than that. Still the party crossed with dry weapons and ammunition.

Unfortunately, the nature of the ground would not admit the using of the litter for more than the fording, else the events that followed might have been avoided. By taking turns in carrying, the party could have reached the Post by noon, the following day. But such was not to be.

Lucille bore up nobly against fatigue, but the secluded life of the past three years had unfitted her frame for such continued exertion, and at length she gave way, completely exhausted.

"We'llhev to camp ontel mornin', now," uttered Duncan. "But thar ain't no great danger, I reckon. Them sarpints won't find out the trick we played 'em in time to do any hurt."

A cosy little hut of bushes was thrown up for Lucille, as the night air was cool, and the dew falling heavily. Into it she crept, soon losing all care and anxiety in a sound, refreshing slumber.

The voyageurs slept upon their arms, with the exception of those detailed to act as guards. Among these were Kit Duncan and the young fur-trader, each of whom felt an unusually deep interest in their fair charge.

Ethan Dunbar was not what is called *in love* with Lucille, as yet, but the circumstances of their meeting had been so strange and romantic, and she had displayed such a rare degree of courage in one so young, that he found himself thinking frequently of her during his watch, and then wondering whether old Ampere would be more friendly when he restored his daughter to him.

At early dawn the party resumed their journey, having eaten a hasty meal to stay their hunger. Old Kit gave clear directions to Dunbar, then turned back for a scout. He had little fear of further trouble with the renegade's party, but the care of Lucille made him more than usually prudent.

As it proved, his action was a most fortunate one. An hour later he dashed up to the party, greatly excited.

"The devil's imps air comin' hot-foot, boys, but we kin git away with 'em, ef you mind what I say. You, young feller, give your men orders to obey *me*, as they would *you*, then take the lady an' make tall tracks fer the Post. Pick out sech men as you want, an' leave the rest to me. We'll kiver your trail, an' not a varmint will pass us."

"You hear what he says, my men," promptly uttered Dunbar. "This lady has been thrown upon our protection. I know that not one of you but will fight for her. Am I right, or are there cowards among us?"

"Yes! no cowards!" came the prompt reply.

"Good! Then act as this man directs. You can trust him!"

Dunbar selected five men, and then hastened forward with Lucille. The others proceeded more leisurely, listening to Old Kit. He told them what he had discovered. The Crees had doubtless divined the *ruse* they had played at the upper ford, and knowing the destination of the party, started to cut them off. Duncan had seen several of their number carefully searching for a trail, gradually working toward the one made by the whites. That found, the pursuit would be immediate. Incumbered with Lucille, they could not reach the Post before being overtaken. For this reason he had resolved to fight, ambushing the Crees. Even if forced to retreat, which he did not expect, the party escorting the maiden would have time to gain safety.

" You may depend on't boys, that's the way the stick floata. The varmints was smarter'n we give 'em credit o' bein'. Most like they got tired o' waitin' fer us, an' sent over a scout to see what war in the wind. Findin' we'd *puckacheed*, they spelled out the way our toes p'nted. It's more'n likely they found fer sure that the lady was with us, fer thar actions now show they *do* know it. In course, they know of the ford Then what would they be likely to do? Send a few 'long the trail to make sure it wasn't a blind one, while t'others struck over to cut us off. But they didn't give the gal credit fer travelin' so fur, an' now the imps is all ahind us. 'Twon't be long afore they strike the trail, then they'll come up, lickety-split. They ain't so many but we kin whip 'em easy, but the gal mought 'a' got hurt; that's why I sent her on ahead. You kin easy see what *we* hev to do. We'll jest keep on ontel we strike a snug bit o' ground for a' ambush, then lay low, an' jest nat'ally give the gal-huntin' varmints ge-mineezers!"

So quoth Old Kit, as he leisurely led the way through the forest. A critical observer might have fancied he was trying to inspire the voyageurs with confidence that he did not entirely feel himself. And there was something in this.

During his brief reconnoitering, Old Kit had made an additional discovery. He knew that the renegade's party had been reinforced, more or less strongly. They would now outnumber the voyageurs, weakened as they were by the departure of six of their best men. Duncan felt that it would be a desperate and bloody struggle, should the parties come into collision.

For an hour more the voyageurs pressed steadily on, leaving behind them a broad, plainly-imprinted trail, like that of a party unsuspecting pursuit. Still, scouts were kept out, both front and rear, to guard against surprise. And as they proceeded, Old Kit was searching for a spot favorable for an ambush.

This was soon found—a spot that caused the eyes of the Death-Trailer to glisten with the fire of anticipated vengeance. He feit that the hour was near when he could proudly turn to the ever-present spirit of his murdered friend and say: " See! have I not faithfully kept my oath of vengeance?"

A broad belt of open ground ran transversely with their

trail. Not a bush, bowlder or shrub rose above the short grass that scantily covered the sandy soil. A short range of rocky hills began close to the northern side of this belt. A narrow defile wound between two of these hills, well masked by shrubbery and climbing plants.

Into this defile Old Kit led his men. At a glance, they comprehended the advantage it would give them. Among the vine-clad rocks they could be hidden until the enemy was safely within their clutches. Then a volley at short range—a charge—that would be all.

Duncan neglected no precautions; he acted as though the leader of the Crees were himself. Knowing that he would never run his head into such a hole, while trailing a desperate enemy, without first feeling the way, he acted accordingly.

Selecting half his men, he led them through the defile, out upon the softer ground beyond, for several hundred yards. Then they retraced their steps, *walking backward*, so that the toes of every footprint pointed toward the north.

Old Kit stationed the voyageurs among the bowlders, renewing his cautions. They were not to stir—not to fire, until he himself gave them the signal. Feeling the utmost confidence in him, each man promised obedience.

These preparations had consumed time, and after all was ready, they had not long to wait. The bushes and vines momentarily rustled, as the ambushed party beheld a savage step out into the open ground, along their trail. Though only one figure was seen, they felt no doubt but that others were in the background—that this brave was the scout of the pursuing party.

If so, his plans had been laid before showing himself, for there was not a moment's hesitation. He glided rapidly along, seemingly unnoticing the fresh trail, heading directly for the pass. As he came nearer, though his head was not turned, the voyageurs could detect the dark eyes glancing keenly, swiftly from side to side, scouring the masked hillside, as though momentarily expecting a shot.

Entering the defile, he passed through, with a few swift glances upon either hand, but the trail deceived him. Reaching the softer ground beyond, he could detect the tracks ahead

and naturally concluded that the pale-faces had pressed on at full speed for the Post.

Reasoning thus, he paused and uttered a sharp, peculiar cry. As if in answer to it, the bushes beyond the open belt parted, and a number of dusky figures emerged. Then Old Kit saw the correctness of his surmise; the renegade's party had been strongly reinforced. They outnumbered the voyageurs two to one. But Death-Trailer's grizzled moustach curled grimly, and his eyes glowed brightly, as he felt their credit would be the greater, in case of success.

Old Kit turned around and leveled his rifle toward the Indian scout, who was waiting the approach of his comrades. The range was long, but he felt confident that neither eye nor rifle could fail him.

A backward glance showed him the main body within fifty yards of the ambush. It was his policy to drive them *back*, not allowing them to gain shelter upon the same side of the belt with his men, if possible. And so he gave the signal, at the same time discharging his rifle.

The Indian scout sprung high into the air, with the rarely-failing death-yell, but Old Kit did not glance toward him. Feeling confident that his aim was fatal, he turned around.

The ambushed volley had been terribly fatal. Nearly a dozen bodies cumbered the ground, dead or dying. Not a bullet had missed its mark, though several had claimed the same victim.

The survivors stood in dismay, seemingly paralyzed. The sudden storm of death had bewildered them. And Old Kit was not the one to neglect such an opportunity.

"*Hi-yi!*" pealed forth his wild war-cry. "Give the red imps ge-lory! Let 'em taste your pups, lads!"

His own revolvers gave the example, which was quickly followed. The volley was not fatal, though several red-skins were more or less severely wounded, but it acted with the result Old Kit desired.

With yells of dismay, the Plain Crees broke and fled toward the friendly cover they had so recently left. After them came the triumphant yells of the ambushed voyageurs, more than one of whom started in pursuit, when Duncan's voice called them back.

"No, boys ; it's poor policy throwing away the game when it's safe in one's own hands. You see the varmints are yet more'n we air, an' then thar we'pons is loaded, which our'n ain't. If we'd break kiver now, they'd make out our strength an' with kiver to back 'em mought make it hot fer us. Not but that we'd whip the varmints in the eend ; but some o' us 'd git his etarnal discharge fust."

The sound sense of this reason was self-evident, and the voyageurs cheerfully obeyed. Then, cautiously, stealthily, Old Kit led his party down from the rocks and out through the defile, heading for the Post. He knew that before the discomfited Plain Crees could collect their energies and discover the real facts, that further pursuit would be in vain.

A few miles further on, Dunbar and his party were overtaken. Their flight had been untroubled, and each congratulated the other upon their escape from the threatening peril.

Two hours later the Post was gained, and Lucille found herself tight clasped to the breast of her father. It was some time before old Francois could be made understand the great peril his child had passed through, but then, briefly, Lucille told the story. Dunbar flushed vividly at her simple words of praise, but Lucille gave the first credit to the strange man, Old Kit.

But when Francois Ampere asked for him, no one answered. Death-Trailer was gone—no man had seen him depart—none knew whence he had gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AVENGER IN HIS ELEMENT.

THE sun was just sinking from view behind the western hill-tops, some thirty hours after Lucille Ampere's safe arrival at her father's post. And leaving her, for the time being,

safe in the care of the old trader, we turn to follow the fortunes of Kit Duncan, the Death-Trailer.

Fully a score miles from the Post, he has his hiding-place, high up among the rock hills. Never yet has Plain Cree been able to track him home, though many a brave has lost his scalp in the attempt. The old man now crouches at the entrance of his den, impatiently awaiting the fall of night. Occasional sentences pass his lips, broken and disconnected, betraying the black thoughts passing in his mind.

"I heerd you, Sam—las' night, when I was sleepin'—an' I'll do it. Yes, I'll do it, this night—afore another sun shines the Plain Crees won't hev a chief. Old Karawee giv' the word fer you to burn—I swore to kill him fer that. I've been waitin' to git him foul, so's to make him suffer some-thin' like he did you, Sam; but, sence you're gittin' impatient, I'll just lift his skelp. You shell see it afore another day, Sam; Old Kit sw'ars that!"

In similar mutterings, the old man showed how his mind had been shattered by the death of his comrade; or rather the being forced to witness the horrible tortures of Yankee Sam, without the power to lift one finger to aid him. In truth, Old Kit was a monomaniac.

As the stars began to twinkle brightly in the blue vault above, Old Kit roused from his reverie. His weapons were carefully looked to; a long cord of curiously twisted buck-skin was wound around his body, below the armpits, yet in such a manner as would not impede his movements. Though so slender, more than once this cord had saved his owner's life, and in that broken section the scout never took the death-trail without it.

Using a narrow, winding trail where the hard rocks retained no trace of the passing footsteps, Death-Trailer descended from his lurking-place. Entering the creek, he followed its sandy bed for full a mile; then, as if satisfied that his trail was amply broken, he struck boldly off through the forest. This course, if maintained, would carry him directly into the main village of the Plain Crees, commanded by the giant chief, Karawee.

Death-Trailer had attempted no disguise, though bound upon a mission of double peril. He knew that the Plain

Crees were at professed peace with the pale-faces. It was no uncommon thing to see white men in the village. Both trappers and voyageurs might be found there at almost any hour. More than one of them had Indian wives. Unless closely scrutinized, Duncan hoped to be taken for some one of these men.

Reaching the edge of the open ground where stood the Cree village, Duncan peered out upon it. A deep frown corrugated his brow. He saw that his time had been ill chosen.

The village seemed unusually lively; warriors flitted to and fro, or were gathered in huts, conversing eagerly, with excited gestures. The fires were burning brightly, plainly revealing the irregular lines of rude huts. Something unusual had or was about to occur.

"Thar it goes!" muttered Death-Trailer, as a shrill, peculiar cry rung out upon the night air. "They're goin' to hold a grand pow-wow or council. Well, let 'em rip. It'll make my work harder, but it's got to be did. I told Sam that this night should wind up old Karawee—an' I won't go back on my word, nuther."

As the cry was repeated, Death-Trailer could see the braves moving toward the large lodge in which he knew the councils were held. And gradually the village became more quiet.

Looking carefully to his weapons, Death-Trailer once more crawled forward, as he neared the village, sinking flat upon belly. Thus, partly covered by the grass and weeds, he crawled along, making scarcely more noise than a serpent could have done. And then he gained the outer row of lodges, undiscovered.

Though more than one brave, whose rank was too humble to allow his joining in the grand council, was in sight, together with sundry squaws and half-grown children, Death-Trailer glided along from lodge to lodge, as though careless whether he was observed or not. Yet he ran but little danger beyond that of being accidentally discovered. There was nothing strange in his prowling around. It might be that of a brave seeking an interview with his dusky Dulcinea.

Gaining the council-lodge, Death-Trailer pressed close to

its rear, where the shadow was deepest. A swift glance around failed to show him the danger that was even then creeping nearer to him; not a human being was to be seen.

A tiny ray of light met Duncan's eye, as he searched the wall. To his delight he found where a bit of chinking had fallen out from between the logs. Stooping, he peered through the aperture.

He could see the fire in the center of the lodge. Around it were seated nearly a score of Indians, sub-chiefs and leading braves of the Plain Cree tribe. One man stood erect, the figure of a giant, yet formed in perfect symmetry. It was Karawee, the giant Cree.

This was the chief who, two years before, had doomed Yankee Sam to death, the one whose scalp Old Kit had that night resolved to take.

Death-Trailer's eyes glowed like living coals as he recognized the chief. Eagerly, though cautiously, he loosened another fragment of the dried clay chinking. As yet the hole was not large enough for him to secure a certain view through it.

As the bits of clay fell before the noiseless knife-point, Death-Trailer felt a horny hand placed upon his shoulder, and wheeled around with a startled look. An Indian brave stood before him, with still outstretched hand, though now it rested only upon air. So deeply had Death-Trailer been absorbed in his work that he had not heard the stealthy foot-fall.

For a moment they confronted each other, in silence; then the savage spoke in his own tongue, low and guardedly.

"Why does the pale-face seek to look upon the secrets of the great council? Does he not know that it is *death*?"

Duncan hesitated in his reply, keenly eying the savage. The words of the latter plainly showed that he did not suspect who the spy really was. Then, too, he spoke guardedly, as though not wishing those within to hear his words. Kit believed that the young brave had come thither with the intention of spying upon the council. And yet he was a Plain Cree; probably it was only curiosity.

But Death-Trailer knew that he must effectually dispose

of the savage, if he hoped to carry out his plans of vengeance. With that view, he replied :

" See—let my brother look inside, and he will learn the reason. The chiefs are betraying their braves!"

His curiosity fully aroused, the savage eagerly bent his eye to the crevice, unsuspecting treachery. Then the right hand of Death-Trailer rose on high, clasping the bright knife.

It fell, full upon the savage's neck, at the point where the spine joined the skull.

Without a groan the Cree fell forward, against the lodge, dead. But Death-Trailer's brow darkened. He heard a sudden bustle within the lodge.

Stooping over the corpse, he peered in at the hole. Several of the chiefs were moving toward the door, silently. They had heard the blow and fall, but evidently did not suspect the truth. Perhaps they believed some curious brave was spying upon them.

Knowing that discovery must follow, Death-Trailer drew his revolver and thrust its muzzle in at the hole. To his intense chagrin, Karawee was invisible, but fearing to hesitate longer, he sighted a brawny brave, and fired.

For a moment the death-yell smothered the sullen report ; then in turn it was drowned by the wild cries of the maddened councilors, as they rushed to the door. Their sacred council had been dishonored ; only the death of the bold desecrator could wipe out the insult.

With rifle firmly secured to his back, as it had been since first entering the village, Death-Trailer held a cocked revolver in either hand as he glided around the lodge corner. Face to face he met several of the braves sent to investigate the disturbance.

So close that the powder flash fairly scorched their faces Death-Trailer discharged both pistols. With shattered skulls the red-skins fell back against their comrades. And leaping over their quivering bodies, Death-Trailer sped away like an arrow fresh from the bow, uttering his wild, thrilling yell that is so well known by the Plain Crees.

" *The Death-Trailer—the Death-Trailer!*" was the cry that broke from a score of throats, and a chill seemed to run through the Plain Crees.

But then the lion-like voice of Karawee the giant rose above the clamor. He ordered them on—to follow him; swearing that on that night their scourge must die—his scalp be dragged in the dust at the heels of a chief!

Tauntingly Death-Trailer laughed as he caught the purport of this speech. Then he darted forward with fairly marvelous speed. And upon his trail, led by giant Kara wee, followed the Plain Crees, nearly one hundred strong.

Straight as an arrow flight, Death-Trailer sped on toward the rock-hills, never once doubling or attempting to break his trail. It seemed as though he invited pursuit, for at intervals his wild yell rung out in taunting cadence.

Strange as it may seem, he was inviting pursuit, though the odds were so frightful. He knew that Karawee led the chase, and knowing his desperate courage, knew that the giant would be one of the foremost in an attack. And that night must witness the death of one or both; he had sworn it to the haunting spirit of his murdered friend and comrade.

On through the night he dashed, straining every nerve to maintain his vantage, knowing that the best and fleetest horses of the Cree tribe were upon his heels. For mile after mile the mad chase continued, with little change in their relative positions. If any thing, Death-Trailer was gaining ground.

The rock hills were rapidly neared, Death-Trailer heading direct for them, like one assured of a safe refuge. Still, despite his luring cry, the Plain Crees pressed on at his heels. At any other time they might have been suspicious, for this was not the conduct of one seeking to escape; rather it was that of one luring them to death.

The foothills were reached. Up a steep, narrow trail the crouds clambered. Scarce two yards apart, the bare rocks rose upon either hand, smooth and inaccessible. This was his trap, long set; yet with their eyes open the Plain Crees rushed madly into it, seeing only the form of the dread scourge of the tribe—Death-Trailer. Yelling, they rushed with a mad, unreasoning rage—to *death*. Chuckling with a fiendish glee, Death-Trailer prepared for their reception. He unslung his rifle, and looked to its cap. Two charged cylinders for the revolver were taken from his pocket and placed

upon a bowlder by his side. The rope was uncoiled from around his body and carefully laid aside. Then he peered over the escarpment, his eyes glowing with the fires of something akin to insanity.

The narrow, defile-like trail extended below him, steep and difficult, some two hundred feet, broken when about half-way, by a rude, platform-like ledge something resembling that connecting two pair of stairs. Up this the red-skins must struggle, if they hoped to reach their enemy; no easy matter in the teeth of a determined, well-armed man.

The point occupied by Death-Trailer was a natural fort, a curiosity even in that region of rocky wonder. The extreme summit was some twenty feet square, with a level floor, though thickly strewn with fragments of rock of various sizes. The ridge ran east and west. From the south came the ascending pass; by this alone could the summit be gained. The other three sides were almost perpendicular, the point being some twenty-five feet above the level of the ridge. To the north faced an almost perpendicular descent of full a hundred feet; then came a ledge similar to that alluded to as being upon the south. From this ledge, again, a winding, intricate trail led down to the open ground, beyond half a mile of which rose another rocky ridge. The reasons for this particular description will soon be made apparent.

The Plain Crees paused at the base of the hill, with loud yells. It seemed as though they were cowed; but such was not the case. Evidently they well knew the position taken by the avenger, and that much blood must be shed before he could be overpowered. But in their madness that fact did not deter them from the attempt.

Karawee briefly addressed them, painting in vivid colors the many insults and great losses this being had put upon them. Now he was in a spot from which retreat was impossible, and it only remained for them to rush boldly on until his scalp was taken. Some lives must be lost in the attempt, but those who fell would surely live again in the Spirit Land, where all was happiness and plenty.

The Plain Crees needed not this speech to embolden them. Ever brave—no Indian tribe can boast more courageous warriors—death alone could quench their thirst for revenge.

Now that the crisis was come, they prepared for work in deadly silence. All of them knew something of the natural fort; many among them had explored it. Hence they laid aside their fire-arms, retaining only their knives, and, in some cases, their hatchets. Every thing that might serve to impede their free motions was laid aside.

The bright moon rode high in the heavens; and a cloud could be seen upon the star-studded vault. From that quarter they had nothing to hope, and knowing that by the bright rays Death-Trailer could easily sight them, the Plain Crees boldly advanced up the trail of death.

Active, lithe, surefooted as mountain goats, the charging braves reached the top of the first stone flight in safety, unharmed. Even in a moment like that, they felt a little surprise that the hunted pale-face had not begun his work of death.

Karawee uttered the war-cry of his tribe, and leaped forward. At the same instant a flash of light shot over the escarpment above, and the giant chief fell back, a horrible cry parting his lips. And like an echo came the thrilling whoop of the Death-Trailer.

Until this moment he had waited with ready rifle to gain a fair shot at the giant chief. But now the ball was fairly opened.

Yelling madly, the Cree braves leaped over the body of their fallen chief, scrambling eagerly up the steep incline, and there kneeling upon the edge of the platform was Death-Trailer,-with both arms extended, the rapidly revolving cylinders raining death upon the crowded mass of savages, whose furious eagerness only obstructed their advance.

In rapid succession the revolvers spoke, each shot dealing death or wounds. The bright flashes lighted up his face with a weird, unearthly glare. He resembled some demon of destruction more than mortal man.

With another shrill, vindictive cry, he dropped his empty revolvers, and seized upon the nearest boulder, rolling its heavy weight over with ease. For a moment he held it poised above the trough-like pass, then pushed it over the escarpment, his wild, maniacal laugh rising high above the horrible shrieks of the torn, crushed and mangled victims of the bounding boulder.

By this means Death-Trailer gained time to exchange the empty cylinders for the loaded ones, and as the Plain Crees began to recover from their momentary panic, he once more opened fire.

It was a carnival of death. The pass ran blood, the rocks became slippery with gore. The passage was fairly blocked up with the dead and dying. Yet, with a desperate courage, worthy a better result, the Plain Crees struggled to gain the fort, leaping over the dead, only to fall before the withering fire of Death-Trailer.

Once more he dropped his empty pistols and seized the rocks. One after another he hurled them along the pass. The slaughter was fearful. Desperate as was their courage, the Plain Crees could no longer face this, but turned and fled to the plain below.

Rapidly Death Trailer reloaded his weapons, fastening the rifle upon the end of the long rope. The surviving Crees were far below, evidently discouraged. He lowered the rifle over the northern side of the fort. It reached the ledge below. Making fast the end, he slowly lowered himself over the edge of the rock. The strain was fearful, but his nerves were steady—his muscles like tempered steel.

A shrill cry caused him to glance upward. An exclamation of horror broke from his lips. A dark figure was outlined against the sky. A knife flashed over the rope. A vindictive laugh came to his ears—the laugh of Karawee, the giant chieftain!

The knife fel! A sharp twang—a cry of horror—then a heavy *thud!*

CHAPTER IX.

SWOOP OF THE VULTURE.

AT nearly the same moment that Old Kit sallied forth from his hill-retreat upon his desperate venture, a foul plot was being hatched deep in the forest that lay to the south-west of Francois Ampere's Post. Over a score dusky figures were gathered around a white man, eagerly listening to his fiery, impassioned words.

A few words will explain who these persons were, and the effect of their conversation. The dusky figures were those of savages, of different tribes—Plain Crees, Knistenaux, Assiniboines, and possibly still others. Yet in one respect they were brothers: each and all were outlaws—cast out by their tribes with the seal of death upon their brows. Outlaws, they preyed upon mankind, even as every man's hand was turned against them. A portion of them were the survivors of the ford ambush: the others, the reinforcement spoken of in a previous chapter.

Their leader was a white man, tall, well-formed, and far from being unhandsome in face. A Canadian by birth, a trapper by education, Jean Pierrot was a renegade by choice. These savages owned him as their leader; yet among those of his own race, Pierrot bore a good name.

Renewing his instructions, the renegade turned and glided rapidly away, alone. He headed toward the trading-post, as though that was his destination. In fact, he was going to visit Lucille Ampere, to congratulate her upon her *safe arrival home*. He believed that no one there suspected the treacherous part he had been playing, that his Indian disguise had not been penetrated.

Reaching the Post, he was admitted without delay. Ampere greeted him frankly, yet Pierrot fancied there was an unusual degree of formality in his manner. Lucille coldly replied to his salutation, then turned aside and renewed her conversation with Ethan Dunbar. Pierrot scowled blackly at

this ; but his brow grew smooth as the young fur-trader glanced keenly at him.

"What is the general feeling among the Indians, Jean ?" asked Ampere, after a few casual remarks.

"You allude to this unfortunate affair at the upper ford ?"

"Yes ; they were Plain Crees, so this gentleman says."

"That can scarcely be—the tribe is at peace with us now. The young man must have been mistaken."

"Scarcely, sir, in the face of such proof," quickly replied Dunbar, a little netiled at the ill-concealed sneer. "My men can show half a dozen Plain Cree scalps."

"Dangerous keepsakes—let the tribe but get a hint of this, and other heads would lose their scalps. But if you speak the truth, they must have been a band of outlaws—there are many such roaming the woods."

"At least there were renegades among them ; I marked one of about your size and build."

"What do you mean ?" uttered Pierrot, hoarsely, his face turning a sickly gray, his eyes glittering like those of a snake.

"My words are plain ; I did not say that *you* were the man. Of course, you know best where you were at that time," coldly returned Dunbar, feeling an unaccountable aversion for this man, he scarcely knew why.

"Do you know that your tone, if not your words, is insulting ?"

"At any rate, I never refuse to account for them to a gentleman, whenever he pleases to demand it of me," retorted the young trader, pointedly.

"Gentlemen—no more," cried Ampere, interposing. "You forget yourself—there is nothing here to quarrel about. My friend," turning to Dunbar, "please come with me for a moment. I have something to consult you about. Lucille, I leave you to entertain our friend Pierrot."

Though Dunbar fancied he detected a meaning glance pass between the two men, he could not refuse compliance, though he felt a peculiar reluctance to leaving the couple together. As Ampere closed the heavy slab door, Pierrot said :

"Lucille, I ask pardon for the anger I was betrayed into by the words of that impudent boy—"

"Mr. Pierrot, you are speaking of a gentleman, and my friend. I do not care to listen to such words applied to one who so nobly risked his life to save mine," quickly interrupted the maiden.

For a moment the renegade scowled blackly, and hot words seemed trembling upon his lips. But with an effort he calmed himself, even smiling pleasantly.

"Well—let it pass. Perhaps you are right. But I didn't call here for the purpose of quarreling with either you or him. You well know that, Lucille—you remember my words when we parted at St. Paul. I told you I would come to you again for an answer, when you had taken ample time to reconsider your words."

"And I told you then that time was not needed. I answered you then—I give you the same answer now; and were we both to live a hundred years longer, at the end of that time my reply would be the same—*no*," firmly replied the maiden, cold and statuesque.

"Think—reflect well—you don't know what may depend upon your words, this evening. I love you now with a love that is almost adoration—don't turn that love into hatred—I warn you for your own sake," said Pierrot, in a low, strangely-quiet tone.

"Do you threaten me?" haughtily cried Lucille, moving toward the door.

"Stay—what do you mean to do?" he cried, springing forward.

"To call my father, to answer your threats—stand aside."

"No—you must listen to me now—you must hear me out. There need be no misunderstanding between us now," and as he gritted forth these words, Pierrot caught her by the arm.

Lucille sought to free herself from the painful grasp, but in vain. Then she uttered a loud shriek. With a fierce curse, Pierrot leaped back, as the door swung open. His hand fell upon the knife-hilt at his waist.

A dark figure sprung forward. A dull, heavy blow followed, and the form of Pierrot was hurled in a heap across the room. His eyes flashing with anger, Ethan Dunbar stood over the ruffian.

"What is the matter, Lucille?" anxiously cried Ampere.

"He threatened me, and when I went to leave the room, he caught me by the arm, swearing that I should listen to him!"

"The cowardly rascal! but I'll—"

"No—let him go now. He is beneath the notice of a true gentleman," added Lucille, her hand upon Dunbar's arm.

"As you say, then. He bears my mark, anyhow," laughed Ethan, thrilling in every vein at the gentle touch, as he bent over and disarmed the renegade, who had recovered sufficiently to comprehend the last words.

"A mark that will cost your heart's blood, curse ye!" he snarled, grasping at the weapons, but in vain.

"Spare your breath for those who fear the threats of a coward, Jean Pierrot. Now begone—you are not wanted here."

"Never were truer words spoken," cried Ampere, hotly. "I have always treated you as a gentleman, Jean Pierrot, because I believed you one. But now, enter my door again, and you shall find that this arm, though that of an old man, is yet strong enough to chastise a woman-insulter!"

"Bear those words in mind, father Ampere, for they'll come home to you sooner than you dream of," laughed the renegade, striding through the doorway. "And as for *you*, young sir, we shall meet again."

"I trust not; there are certain animals one prefers not to dirty one's fingers with—and you belong to the tribe," carelessly replied Dunbar.

Jean Pierrot strode away from the Post. Our friends lightly regarded his threats, as the empty ebullitions of an angry man. But an hour later their opinion was changed.

A scout—one of Dunbar's men, who were all still at the Post—came in with startling tidings. While scouring the woods he had met Pierrot, though himself unseen. The renegade was cursing madly, uttering fearful threats. His curiosity excited, the scout followed his steps until Pierrot joined a band of savages. By close attention he learned enough to satisfy him that they were the same who had ambushed the upper ford, and were now contemplating an attack upon the trading-post. Creeping away, he had brought the tidings at full speed.

Ampere was horrified to learn that the son of his bosom friend of past days was such a villain. And this was the man he had selected for the husband of his idolized child! He groaned with rage and mortification.

"And to think—he murdered my poor Andre! We had him here in our power, and blindly let him escape!"

"Never mind—we know him now, and he can not escape us all. But now to prepare for our visitors; we'll give them a warm welcome, at any rate," cheerily added Dunbar, summoning his men from their quarters in the forest beyond the Post, where they had escaped the notice of the renegade.

The Post had been built with an eye to defense, and more than once it had withstood the test of fire and bullet. It was large and of a square form, shaped in the model of a block-house of the olden days. Of two stories, the upper one overspread the lower at least two feet upon either side, with loopholes in the floor through which bullets or water could be discharged, as the necessity required. The roof was flat, of stout squared logs. Over this had been spread a layer of stiff clay mixed with chopped swamp grass, closely packed, impervious to both fire and water. The upper story was used mainly as a storehouse for goods and furs. The lower one was divided into three rooms: one serving as a store, the others for cooking and sleeping. At the rear of this building stood several log huts. In these the Post employees were quartered.

Dunbar mustered his men, together with the men employed by Ampere; over a score in all. Briefly he informed them of the threatened attack. In one voice they declared their readiness—eagerness, to measure strength with the outlaws. The trader smiled proudly. He felt that the renegade would be taught a costly lesson before many hours.

It may seem improbable that Pierrot should even dream of attacking such a strong position, manned as it was by a force fully equal in number to his own band, nor would he, had he not been deceived. Not an hour before his arrival at the trading-post, Dunbar's men returned from their rendezvous, whether they had been dispatched for the men left in charge of the goods and furs. These had been securely ~~washed~~. As Dunbar had anticipated, Ampere's demeanor to-

ward the preserver of his daughter had greatly changed. He offered the young trader his stock of furs at a reasonable rate. One fine lot was stored several miles above. To fetch these, Dunbar had called in his entire force. And unfortunately for himself, this fact had escaped the scouts Pierre kept on the look-out. Thus he believed he would only have Ampere and his half a dozen voyageurs to deal with.

Pierrot had his reasons for an early attack, and it was sometime before midnight that the inmates of the Post discovered the first suspicious movement. A number of dark, phantom-like figures were seen gliding stealthily across the open tract that had been cleared around the Post. A word from Dunbar checked their eagerness.

"They think to surprise the men asleep in the cabin," he said. "They do not dream of our being ready for them. Wait until I give the word—then fire. One volley will give the rascals their fill."

The savages spread out so as to surround the buildings. Their scouts had announced all quiet at the Post, and they evidently anticipated an easy victory. Only for the fortunate discovery by Dunbar's scout, this might have been the case. The surprise would have insured success.

From their loops the voyageurs closely watched the progress of the savages, eagerly listening for the signal that should bid them strike a deadly blow at the creeping reptiles. The outlaws neared the buildings, and then, when only a score yards away, the signal came.

"Fire! give the dogs a taste of your metal, boys!" shouted Dunbar, setting the good example.

The range was short, the creeping figures were quite clearly outlined upon the cleared ground by the brilliant moonlight, and the sudden volley was deadly in the extreme. For a moment the survivors stood, as they leaped to their feet, petrified with amazement and horror. Then, as the revolvers of the voyageurs began to play upon their thinned ranks, the outlaws melted away in the night with yells of dismay.

"Nobly done, my lads!" cried Dunbar. "One dose sickened them. But best to be upon the safe side. Load up, and hold by your stations. Wherever an inch of living red hide shows itself, plant a bullet there to feel its texture."

All without grew still and hushed. The painful moans of the sorely wounded died away. Only for the dusky forms lying so still and ghastly in the clear moonlight, one might have fancied the past few moments but a dream, the forest lay so still and peaceful.

Gradually a sensation of something akin to awe crept over the spirits of the defenders. This dead silence was strangely trying. Few among them but would far rather have heard the thrilling war-whoop of the Plain Crees as the dusky warriors darted forward to the deadly assault. The suspense was very trying.

Their glances keenly roving, the voyageurs peered through their loop-holes; but nothing could be seen of their foes. It seemed as though, discomfited by that death-dealing volley, the Plain Crees had abandoned their hopes of success. But neither Ampere nor Dunbar believed this. They knew for what a great prize the renegade, Pierrot, was playing. He would not so easily give up the game, now that his mask was fairly cast aside.

And so the hours dragged wearily by, the defenders, still at their stations, watchful, but woefully ignorant of the peril that was slowly creeping nearer and nearer—of the storm that was soon to burst.

The alarm came from the kitchen. There seemed to be a brief scuffle—the sound of a voice crying for assistance; then the falling of heavy blows.

"Help—father! Save me!"

The words abruptly ended, and the peculiar gurgle, as of one choking. Yet there could be no mistake; the tones were those of Lucille Ampere, raised in mortal terror.

For a moment the father stood like one petrified. The alarm—so sudden—was so strange. What enemy could have gained an entrance unseen and unheard until felt? and how?

But then as the sounds of heavy blows—of desperate struggling—of yells and curses of rage and anguish; as these sounds filled the interior of the Post, all else was forgotten as the voyageurs, led by Dunbar and Ampere, rushed to the aid of their struggling comrades in the adjoining room.

Only the quick flashing of revolvers lighted up the scene. By these, momentary glimpses of rapidly-moving figures could be caught; but their color or identity could only be guessed at. And then it became a wild, deadly *melee*, friend striking friend quite as often as enemy.

"A light—for God's sake a light!" shouted Ethan Dunbar.
"A light, or all is lost!"

As these words broke upon the frightful confusion, the conflict seemed to be abandoned—or momentarily dropped—by mutual consent. Yet with ready weapons each man crouched down, with flesh thrilling in expectation of receiving a sudden, venomous blow in the dark. Then, from the open air without it seemed, a shrill yell sounded clearly. A quick rustle followed, and the pale-faces flung out their arms to ward off any blow that might be aimed at them.

A bright flash, followed by a slight explosion; then a steady glow. Emptying his powder-horn upon a pile of dried bush, Ampere had kindled a fire by discharging his pistol.

A terrible scene was revealed. Half a dozen bodies cumbered the floor; some groaning with agony, others still in death. Armed men, with weapons raised ready to repel an attack, crowded around the room. But they all wore the dress of white men, not a living savage was to be seen. Was it the work of magic? Where were the dusky foemen whose shrill yells and death-dealing blows had so recently rung through the building? Gone!

"Lucille—my child—where are you?" shrilly cried Francois Ampere, his voice trembling with apprehension.

No voice replied. With a cry of heart-breaking agony, the man fell to the floor, his heart, as well as body, sorely wounded.

CHAPTER X.

THE CARNIVAL OF DEATH.

DESPITE his reckless bravery, a thrill of horror ran through the veins of Death-Trailer as he glanced upward on hearing the shrill, vindictive yell of the giant chief. Though the face of the savage was hidden in the shadow, there could be no mistaking that huge massive head and shoulders. And even in that dread moment—even as the bright knife of the Plain Cree quivered above the taut thong that held the scout from death—Kit Duncan found himself wondering if the giant really bore a life charmed against the blows of mortal arm.

Two years previously he had driven a stout hunting-knife to the hilt in Karawee's breast. One year after, he had shot him down upon the threshold of the council-lodge, the rifle bullet passing clear through his body. And only a few minutes before, he had noted the fall of the chief at the head of his braves, upon the narrow platform that broke the two flights. Yet there he knelt, alive and exultant!

Death-Trailer's eyes had not deceived him; for the giant chief had indeed fallen at the head of his braves, as the scout's rifle-report opened the carnival of death. But Karawee escaped death, though by scarcely more than a hair's breadth.

In his eagerness to make sure work, Death-Trailer had aimed at the giant's head. The moonlight was not sufficiently clear for him to draw a very fine bead; and added to this, the target was far *below* him. The natural result was that Death-Trailer's bullet carried *high*, merely plowing through the top scalp of the chief, felling him senseless not dead.

Then came the terrible struggle to ascend the death-trail in the face of the avenger, whose weapons soon piled the platform high with dead and dying Crees, lying thick upon the body of Karawee. And thus the chief escaped serious

injury from the bowlders afterward hurled down by Duncan. Though painfully bruised, the layer of dead above him proved a tolerable protection.

The pain of these blows, seemed to revive the chief, awaking him to life, though it was some time before he could comprehend his situation. But when he did, it was to act.

He distinguished the yells of his discomfited braves as they fled precipitately down the death-trail, and the wild, taunting laugh of the avenger smote upon his ear. A stern, desperate resolution filled Karawee's heart. As he realized that the entire party of his braves had fled from before the arm of one, he felt that the Plain Crees were disgraced. And unless he could avenge that disgrace, he would die.

With bared knife clenched betwixt his teeth, Karawee slowly and painfully crept up the steep trail, daring the scourge of his tribe alone and unaided. A single yell would bring on his braves, with one mighty rush, but the chief spoke not a word. It was man to man—his scalp against that of the Death Trailer.

The act was that of a truly brave man. The odds were strongly against him. Both hands and feet were occupied in the climbing. Had Death-Trailer peered down the pass, the chief would have been utterly at his mercy. Karawee could not have averted the death-blow, nor have returned it. But such was not to be. At that moment Duncan was slowly lowering himself over the edge of the precipice.

Nearing the platform, Karawee nerved himself, and with one desperate bound, leaped into the little fort, his right hand clutching the glittering knife. But no foeman confronted him. Death-Trailer was gone.

For a moment the chief stood aghast. Was this being no mortal—was he in reality what many of the savages believed him: a demon—a spirit?

But then the chief darted forward. A peculiar sound came to his ear, and the dark line encircling a huge bowlder aided his comprehension. Peering over the escarpment he distinguished the swaying form of the Death-Trailer.

Thus it was that the exultant cry broke from his lips, startling the Plain Crees below and awaking Old Kit to a sense of his imminent peril. Thus it was that the knife

descended—the taut rope parted with a sharp *twang*—the cry of horror soared upward as the body of the trapper struck heavily upon the rocks below.

Karawee heard the sickening *thud*—saw the dark figure lying there upon the rocks without motion, and leaped to his feet, waving his bloodless weapon above his head, uttering a cry of vindictive triumph, shrill, unearthly as the shriek of the snowy-crowned eagle. His massive form quivered and shook in every fiber, and for a moment it seemed as though he was about to fall over the precipice to share the fate of his inveterate foe; but with a violent effort he started back from the dizzy verge, sinking to the rock, seemingly lifeless.

The Plain Crees below had heard the first cry of their chief, but as they had beheld him fall, seemingly dead, they listened wonderingly, half-believing it to be some cunning trick of the Death-Trailer. But then as the second yell came from the hill, so full of triumph, they could no longer mistake. No throat but that of giant Karawee could utter such a cry. And without pausing to ask of each other its meaning, the Indians darted once more toward the steep incline that was still damp with the blood of their slaughtered comrades, clambering up the slippery trail like mountain-goats, even while half expecting another deadly reception with every moment.

But the summit was gained in safety. The first object their eyes rested upon was the prostrate, blood-stained figure of their revered chief. With low wailing cries of anguish the foremost braves sprung to his side forgetting for the moment the dreaded Death-Trailer.

They saw that Karawee had not been deprived of his scalps—that his heart still beat faintly. And then, their first great fear partly quelled, the braves remembered their terrible foe; where was Death-Trailer?

They had not noticed him leave the fort; there was only one trail leading downward from it, and upon that their eyes had been riveted ever since their retreat. Then where was he? As their glances met, the same answer might be read in every face. The Plain Crees—are proverbially superstitious, nor were these braves an exception.

Dreading they knew not what, the warriors seized the senseless form of their chief and hastened with reckless steps down the narrow trail. More than one of their number fell, but the body of Karawee was not suffered to touch the rocks. When one had stumbled, another supplied his place, nor did any one of them breathe freely until the level ground was reached. Then the most experienced braves set about restoring their chief, while the others, with ready weapons, watched for the expected coming of the Death-Trailer. Only for the utter helplessness of the chief, not one of the Crees but would have taken to his heels, so fully did superstition sway them.

Nearly an hour elapsed before Karawee gave the first signs of recovering consciousness. A low, glad cry broke from the eager warriors as his eyes heavily opened. The giant chief was the idol of his tribe. Every ear was strained to catch the words that parted Karawee's lips.

"Where is his scalp—the Death-Trailer?"

"He is gone!" replied a brave, with a superstitious shudder.

The words acted like magic upon the mind of the chief, and seemed to fully restore the strength of his body, for he leaped convulsively to his feet, and rapidly sketched what had occurred upon the mound. Then, without waiting for a reply or comments, he darted away toward the nearest trail leading round the mound of death.

Swiftly Karawee neared the foot of the cliff, never stronger in limb or surer of foot. But then he paused abruptly, as though turned to stone.

A dark, serpent-like coil lay before him, together with the fragments of a broken rifle. But where was the human form he had expected to see—where was the body of the Death-Trailer? Gone!

The savages huddled together. The grip of superstition was once more upon them. Karawee noted this, and with a violent effort, broke the spell that fettered his limbs, and leaped forward, bending over the coil. Then one exultant yell broke from his lips, as he held up his hand, smeared with blood!

"See! Death-Trailer was only a man—the veins of a spirit are not filled with blood! Search for the crippled snake—and drink his heart's blood!"

Like hounds the Crees quartered the ground, seeking for their prey. The moonlight no longer shone here. The hill cast a deep shadow over the rocky ground. A dozen dark spots could be seen from any one position; but when they came to be examined in turn, these proved the empty holes and crevices beneath the bowlders. Nothing could be found of the Death-Trailer's body.

Karawee made a wider circuit, reaching out to the moonlighted ground. A cry answered some discovery. Eagerly the savages flocked to the spot. The chief pointed out a small smear of fresh blood; then, a few feet further on, another. The truth was plain. Only crippled, Death-Trailer had crept away from the death-mound. And then, like hounds, the Indians took up his trail, led by the giant chief.

Even by moonlight this was easily lifted. The spots of blood were frequent upon the rocks; and where the soil was moist or sandy, the deep imprint of knees, dragging feet and digging fingers were distinct. Evidently badly crippled, Death-Trailer had been forced to drag himself along by his hands.

The trail headed toward the second range of hills, before alluded to. But it seemed impossible that the man could have gained these, in such a condition. Still, over two hours had now elapsed since his frightful fall; but seemingly forgetting this fact, the Plain Crees eagerly searched every shrub and crevice along the blood-stained trail, expecting with every moment to make the discovery so ardently longed for.

Truly, Kit Duncan had narrowly escaped death—almost miraculously. When he recognized the giant chief preparing to cut the rope that held him suspended full fifty feet above the rocks, a strange terror came upon him, almost paralyzing his limbs for the moment. The rope slid through his hands with frightful rapidity, and it was only when the acute pain of the blistered flesh made itself felt, that he realized his peril. Almost instinctively his fingers and legs wound tightly around the leather rope, fairly checking his downward descent.

At this moment Karawee severed the thong. Duncan felt himself falling, and a cry of horror broke from his lips, ab-

uptly checked as he struck heavily upon the rock. Then all was blank.

The distance Death-Trailer fell, after so abruptly checking his descent, was but little more than twenty feet. He alighted fairly upon his feet, then lay doubled up in a senseless heap.

He knew not how long a time had elapsed, when, with a groan, he opened his eyes and raised his head. Yet the feeling was strong within him that he must flee; at the moment he scarcely realized from what danger. A despairing cry broke from his lips as he strove in vain to arise; the lower portion of his frame seemed paralyzed.

Clutching the points of rocks, Death-Trailer dragged himself along, turning his face toward the second range of hills, more from instinct than aught of reasoning. And so, while the Plain Crees were assiduously laboring to restore their chief to consciousness, upon one side of the rock-fort, upon the other their inveterate enemy was slowly, painfully creeping away from them.

As he proceeded, Old Kit gradually recovered from the terrible shock; but one leg was still helpless. The bone grated as he felt of the limb. It was broken. Setting his teeth sternly, Death-Trailer crawled on.

Nearer and nearer the rock hills loomed up, when a wild yell came soaring over the level stretch. For one instant Death-Trailer glanced back, then pressed on with his best speed. He knew that the avengers of blood would be upon him sooner or later. A significant trail connected them; *a trail of blood!*

"Just let me reach the hills—it's all I ax," the old man muttered betwixt his clenched teeth, momentarily pausing to wipe the cold drops from his brow. "Thar in the rocks, whar they kain't surround me—whar they've got to come up, white man fashion, face to face—I kin make one more fight fer Sam. I don't reckon he'll grum'le 'cause I didn't rub out enough o' the varmints, when I tell him I've did my level best."

Steadily on the old man crawled, the cold dew of unutterable anguish standing thick upon his brow, but never once did an audible groan pass his lips after his terrible journey was once fairly begun. The broken leg dragged helplessly

marking the rocks and sand with the blood that oozed from where the splintered bones had lacerated the swollen flesh, yet the man crawled on like some crippled monster.

The base of the hill was gained, and as he glanced quickly around him, a little cry of grim joy broke from the man's lips. He recognized the point. Until then he feared he had gone astray. And as he glanced back upon the rock-strewn ground over which he had dragged himself, Death-Trailer could distinguish a number of dusky figures, evidently approaching. A harsh chuckle broke the stillness.

"Come on, ye red imps o' Satan—bunged up as I be, mebbe you'll find me a tough mouthful afore ye chaw me up fit to swaller. Little as I valley yer skelps at, I reckon you won't buy mine none too cheap, a'ter all."

Five minutes later Death-Trailer sat at the base of a huge bowlder, the top of which overhung his position. Before him lay a table-like ledge that could only be gained by rough climbing over jagged bowlders.

He drew the knife from his belt and placed it betwixt his teeth. Before him were placed the two loaded cylinders. In either hand was a cocked revolver. These emptied, it would be but the work of a moment to press the spring and explode the cylinders. And thus he awaited the coming of the Plain Crees, knowing that death was almost inevitable, yet only anxious to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Along the blood-marked trail came the savages, led by Karawee, unerring as fate. The hill base was gained, still the tell-tale blotches beckoned them on—*to death!*

Death-Trailer's eyes glowed with phosphorescent brilliancy as he heard their moccasined feet scrambling over the rocks. The revolvers covered the edge of the platform.

A dark, ball-like object rose above the level. A pistol-shot broke the stillness. With a horrible yell of agony, the huge form of Karawee sprung up into full view, bounding fairly upon the ledge. Mingled with his yell came a second shot; but it was not needed. The colossal frame tottered, then fell heavily forward, at the feet of Death-Trailer, whose voice rose in a cry of fiendish exultation.

With cries of horror and anguish, the Plain Crees witness-

the fall of their idolized chief. But as the revolvers speak again, carrying death into their ranks, they press forward to avenge him. Once more the carnival of death rages. The revolvers work rapidly, yet not aimlessly. Death-Trailer does not lose his self-possession. He makes each shot tell.

Despite their courage, the savages quail before this terrible man. Can it be that he is mortal? With this fear at their hearts, they fall back, shrinking behind bowlders and bushes.

The hesitation, though not of many minutes' duration, is fatal to more than one of them. Long before they gather courage for another final assault, Death-Trailer exchanges the empty cylinders for the loaded ones.

As one man, the Plain Crees dash forward, resolved to conquer at any loss. Again the pistols speak rapidly. But still the Crees press on, now almost covering the ledge.

CHAPTER XI.

OUT IN THE NIGHT.

IT was indeed Lucille's voice, raised in terror, that alarmed the defenders of the trading-post. Until a few minutes before, she had been up in the second story of the building, but feeling reassured by the long-continued silence without, she descended the ladder, and groped her way into the kitchen, where she expected to find her father stationed.

One of the voyageurs addressed her, and Lucille replied. Only for that, this portion of the story might never have been written, for the sound of her voice guided the spoiler.

A strong arm was suddenly flung around her lithe waist, and a hand pressed firmly over her lips, but not quickly enough to utterly smother the shriek that gave the alarm. She was lifted clear of the floor, and then it seemed as though she was falling. Like one in a dream, she knew that human forms were rapidly rushing past her, and dimly, indis-

tinctly, there came the confused sound of a hand-to-hand struggle, growing fainter and less distinct, as she seemed to float rapidly through the air. Then, with a faint cry, she seemed to awake.

An involuntary cry of surprise broke from her lips. She was in the open air. Far above, through the gently-swaying leaves of the huge forest trees, twinkled the bright stars that so densely studded the vast blue dome; and the full-faced moon shone over all, clear and proudly.

Lucille's first glance distinguished this much. Her second wrung a cry of apprehension from her lips. A pair of evilly-glittering eyes were peering down into hers, long, snaky locks of hair touched her neck, and an olive-tinged face bowed until a hot breath seemed to scorch her cheek. She recognized Jean Pierrot, and knew that it was his arms that held her so firmly against his breast.

The thought gave her strength to struggle partly free. But though her feet now rested upon the ground, the renegade held her fast in his arms. There was something in his unyielding, almost fierce grip that caused Lucille to tremble with a vague but sickening terror, very much akin to that felt by her when held motionless by the fascinating eyes of the rattlesnake.

"Ha! ha! little use for you to struggle now, my dainty maid!" chuckled Pierrot, his grating voice husky with ill-restrained passion. "You are mine now—mine, body and soul!"

"What would you do, Jean Pierrot?" asked Lucille, her voice trembling despite her effort at self-control.

"What would I do?—and you ask me that? But 'tis only polite to answer a lady's question, however foolish it may be. What would I do? Take by the strong hand, the bride that fair words and soft speeches failed to gain me. You comprehend? A few hours since, you scorned my honest offer to make you my wife—and then laughed at my defeat, together with that upstart trader. But now—there is a slight change, I fancy. He is dead—you are here in my power, to be treated as I choose. Do you know what that means? Let me advise you now while my brain is still cool and clear, not to provoke me too far. At times I am but little better than a madman. And

hen I often do what I regret afterward. For that reason I warn you. Though I love you—love you with all the passion of a man's heart—I could not long listen to words like those you gave me to-day, and keep my reason. For your own sake, I warn you to be careful what you say," rapidly uttered Pierrot, in a tone that frightened Lucille.

A bright light now shone through the open loops of the block-house, and the wild, confused sounds of a desperate struggle came quite clearly to the ears of the couple as they stood just within the edge of forest. The renegade laughed vindictively.

"See! my brave men are at work—listen to the yells—the biows! Blood is falling like rain—the Post is filled with death to-night!"

"My poor father!" gasped Lucille. "Let me go—they are killing him!" and she struggled desperately to free herself.

"He is old enough to die—as well to-night as any other time. Ha! wildcat! must I bind your hands, then?" he gritted fiercely, his eyes flaming like those of a wild beast.

Stung to frenzy, Lucille struck the renegade repeatedly in the face, almost blinding him for the moment. Mad with rage and pain, Pierrot sought to hold her hands, but failing in this, raised his clenched fist and dealt the maiden a sickening blow full upon the upturned face. With a faint, gasping cry, she sunk back, helplessly lying upon his arm.

"You brought it upon yourself, my dainty pet," the renegade muttered, brushing a sleeve across his face. "I hate to use you so rough—but perhaps 'tis all for the best. Your spirit must be broken entirely before you submit to me now and this is a good beginning."

Jean Pierrot cast a rapid glance around, then catching the half-senseless form of Lucille Ampere up in his arms, he suddenly turned and darted away through the forest. The weight of the maiden seemed to be scarcely felt. The renegade was an unusually strong man.

It was not until at least a mile had been traversed that Lucille recovered her senses sufficiently to fully comprehend her situation. A feeling of sickening dread filled her heart as she felt the close embrace of the renegade, and the heavy

throbbing of his heart as her form pressed his breast. Shrinking from the hot breath that fanned her cheek, by a sudden effort, Lucille managed to set her feet to the ground.

"If I must go with you, I will walk," she uttered, with an effort, steadyng her voice.

"Very well; only I thought to save you from fatigue. See how considerate I am! Ah, Lucille, my angel, you have gained a model husband, and I trust you will show your gratitude by being properly obedient," laughed the renegade.

"Where are you taking me to?" she asked, after a pause.

"First we'll go to the rendezvous I gave my dusky friends, and there await their coming; which will be as soon as they finish work at the Post. Then we will take a little bridal tour into the mountains, until the storm blows over. How do you like the programme, little pet?"

Lucille made no reply, but the taunting tone of the renegade worked very differently from what he anticipated. Instead of filling her heart with terror, by his thinly-vailed threats, the knowledge of what she had to expect from him, nerved the maiden to a stern, deadly courage. And from that moment her brain was actively devising plans by which she might foil his purpose.

Though he suffered Lucille to walk, it was evident that Pierrot thought it barely possible that pursuit would be given, or else he yielded to the instincts of a life spent in the forest. As he struck the bank of a small creek, slowly flowing over a firm, gravelly bottom, the renegade lifted Lucille into his arms and carefully waded up stream for nearly half a mile, though the windings of the creek carried him far out of the course he had been pursuing. Yet he firmly believed that, long ere this, the outlaw band that called him their chief, had won the trading-post, slaughtered its once-defenders, and secured the rich plunder it contained of goods, liquor and furs. Surprised, as they had been, he would not believe that the white men could possibly conquer. Nor is it probable that they would have done so, but for the cry Lucille uttered as she awoke to the consciousness of captivity. Coming to the ears of the savages, changed in tone by passing through the thick, log walls, they believed it to be the renegade's signal for their retreat.

"We wil. rest here for a while, at least," at length said Jean Pierrot, abruptly halting in a little glade. "It is nearly time for my lads to come up, for if I was not at the rendezvous, they were to look for me here."

Worn and weary, her heart sick with dreadful forebodings, Lucille sunk down upon the dew-dampened grass. For the moment she entirely lost sight of her own danger, thinking of what might have occurred at the trading-post. Her father—was he alive, or dead? A pitiful sob of anguish broke from her lips, as his still and ghastly form seemed pictured before her mind.

Jean Pierrot eyed her strangely, through the gloom that was only partially dissipated by the descending moon. A devil was working in his breast, though he strove to choke it down. But a very little would suffice to fan the smoldering flame into a blaze that would devour all before it. Never before in her life had Lucille been in greater peril than at that moment.

As though to drive away his mad thoughts, Pierrot spoke.

"You are foolish in thus giving way to your feelings, Lucille. It can do no good, and will only weaken you, with a long journey before you. And then—think of the feelings of your future husband when he sees you so despondent this early in the bridal tour."

"Jean Pierrot, you are a contemptible coward as well as villain, to insult a helpless woman," cried Lucille.

"Hard—if you are wise, my dear, you will school your tongue a little better. I don't profess having an angel's temper; I warn you, then, not to push me too far," slowly replied Pierrot, meaningly.

"You can do no more than you have, already," bitterly cried Lucille. "You murdered my poor father—"

"And have his daughter wholly in my power; exactly. And let me add—her future. Upon her own conduct depends her fate. If she chooses I will treat her well, and pledge myself to marry her, even as though she had accepted my offer to-day, instead of refusing it. But if—"

"Marry you—the blood of my father still fresh upon your hands? Never! Death—ten thousand times rather!"

"Death is fickle—it does not always come at one's call.

It will not come to you, yet. I shall guard you too well, But Lucille, I warn you. I love you now better than my life—than my soul. But do not drive me too far, with your bitter words. We will both regret it if you do. When I lose my temper, I am a madman. If you can not love me—"

At these last words, the half-crazed maiden broke into a laugh, low but indescribably taunting, filled with an intense oathing that could not be mistaken. That laugh was the ast blow.

With the fierce snarl of a maddened wild beast, the renegade sprung forward and seized Lucille. She shrieked aloud in her terror, but in his grasp was as a mere child. His arms closed around her form, his hot breath fanned her face. She begged for mercy, but the madman did not heed her.

For a moment the frightful struggle continued. Then, with a horrible, snarling cry, Jean Pierrot released Lucille and staggered back, one hand pressed to his side, where shone the blood-stained hilt of a dagger. With a spasmodic effort he plucked the weapon from its living sheath, and raised it aloft as though about to rush upon the maiden. But with the first step forward, he fell headlong at Lucille's feet.

As she struggled in his grasp, Lucille felt the haft of the dagger touch her hand. Almost without thought she clutched it, and then with an arm nerved by despair, plunged it to the very hilt in the renegade's side. The stroke was mortal; ever as he fell, the death-gurgle sounded in Jean Pierrot's throat.

For a minute Lucille stood as though petrified, holding out her blood-stained hand, eying it with horror. But this did not last long. The deed had been committed to defend her honor; it was retribution, not murder.

Though shuddering, Lucille bent over the corpse and took from it a brace of revolvers. She knew well how to use the weapons, and they might be of use. Then she turned and endeavored to retrace her steps to the Post. For an hour she wandered aimlessly, lost in the forest. Then, utterly exhausted, terrified and despondent, sunk down upon the ground and sobbed as if her heart would break. Gradually these grew fainter; she slept.

The moon set, the gray light of dawn crept down through the forest foliage and shone upon the slumbering maiden. A

cautious footfall broke the stillness, but she did not hear it. The bushes behind her parted gently, and the head and shoulders of a human being showed through the leafy frame. A pair of black eyes sparkled vividly as they rested upon the bowed form of the sleeper, and then a hideously-painted savage stepped forward and lightly touched Lucille.

With a cry she started up, with leveled revolver. At the sharp report, a horrible yell of agony filled the forest glade.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST TRAIL.

IT was a horrible, sickening *melee*. Yelling like wild beasts, the Plain Crees madly swarmed over the rough boulders, leaping upon the table-like rock. Supported against the leaning bowlder, sat Death-Trailer, his pistols thinning the ranks of the enemy with wonderful rapidity. Each shot carried death upon its voice. In rapid succession victim after victim was added to the long list of Plain Cree warriors sacrificed by the avenger in memory of his murdered friend and comrade.

But this could not last long. The revolvers at length grew silent; the hammers clicked harmlessly upon the capless tubes. Death-Trailer hurled the weapons into the struggling mass, and then drew his long knife."

The Crees yelled exultantly. They divined the truth, and in a body they rushed upon the defiant cripple.

The first one was met by a lightning-like thrust, and sunk to the crimsoned rock to join those of his comrades who had gone before. But then a dozen Crees were struggling madly above the trapper, whose knife still played wonderfully.

Their yeals of vindictive exultation broke the air. Through a trail of death—through rivers of blood, they had pressed relentlessly on, until now the quarry lay at their feet.

And yet, even in the moment of victory, came defeat.

A clear voice rung out from the hillside, giving the startling order:

"Fire!"

A rattling volley followed promptly, and a number of savages fell, dead or dying. Yells of agony filled the air.

"Charge, lads—and strike home!" cried the same voice that had given the order to fire. "Out revolvers, and make every shot count!"

But the surviving Plain Crees did not wait for the onset. Fearfully weakened in numbers, they leaped wildly down over the rocks, fleeing at breakneck speed, followed by hissing pistol-bullets, the cheers of their assailants quickening their steps.

"Hold! lads—go no further," cried the leader, leaping on the table-rock. "Let them go—besides, among these cursed rocks, there's danger in chasing them. But we must find out what it was they were after up here?"

"You won't hev to look fur, young feller," promptly replied a feeble voice, that Dunbar—for he it was that commanded the party—instantly recognized.

"What! is that you, Duncan?"

"All thar is left o' me. Jest hyste some o' these dead dogs off 'n me—my wind ain't none too plenty, anyhow," added Death-Trailer.

In a few moments Dunbar had freed the old man of his load of enemies, and was looking at Kit's hurts.

"It's no use, young feller—no use. I've got my discharge, at last. Thar's sca'cely a' inch o' my karkidge that them imps didn't feel 'th thar knives. They've tetched my wind, boy, too—I kin sca'cely breathe."

Old Kit paused, spitting a great clot of blood from his mouth. Dunbar poured a little brandy between his lips. Death-Trailer, slowly, brokenly, added:

"Thank ye, lad. But one favor, afore I go under. Look under them imps an' see 'f thar's a whale o' a red-skin, w'arin' round his neck a silver shield. I mean Karawee, the big chief."

Dunbar did as requested, and soon found the dead chief. Then Old Kit hastily gave an outline of Yankee Sam's death, and his own vow, adding:

"I couldn't rest easy, even ef dead, unless I could tell Sam I'd lifted Karawee's skelp. You won't cross a dyin' man, will ye?" Old Kit said, anxiously.

Silently the corpse was dragged beside him, and with a strength that was fairly marvelous, considering his condition, Old Kit tore off the scalp. Waving it above his head, he essayed to utter his wild war-cry, but the sound died upon his lips, as his head fell back.

He had taken up the long, last death-trail !

But little more need be added. The Indians had been defeated at the trading-post. Through the hole they had dug beneath the wall, leading into the cellar, they had entered. Immediately Dunbar set out in pursuit of the renegade and his captive. Hearing the firing at the rock-hill, he had hastened to learn its cause, arriving just as the Death-Trailer succumbed.

Leaving two men to bury Kit Duncan, he continued the search, and found Lucille a few hours afterward. Her shot had slain the savage, who was one of the fugitives from the Post.

The rest may safely be left to the imagination of the reader. Francois Ampere recovered from his wounds, and gave Ethan Dunbar the hand of his child, Lucille. Together the trio journeyed to St. Paul; from thence to Montreal.

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